

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR AND THE BRITISH IMPERIAL DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

The following study argues that existing historical interpretations of how and why the unification of British North America came about in 1867 are flawed. It contends that rather than a movement propelled mainly by colonial politicians in response to domestic pressures - as generally portrayed in Canadian-centric histories of Confederation - the imperial government in Britain actually played a more active and dynamic role due to the strategic and political pressures arising from the American Civil War. Rather than this being a basic 'withdrawal', or 'abandonment' in the face of US power as is argued on the rare occasions diplomatic or strategic studies touch upon the British North American Act: this thesis argues that the imperial motivations were more far-reaching and complex. The British policy on union was bound up with the wish to make the provinces more responsible for defence, a need greatly intensified by the Civil War; however this imperative was meant to help preserve the North American colonies in the empire and even more vitally outside of the orbit of the United States. From the metropolitan government's point of view Confederation had its genesis in the antebellum period and was a long-term aim - not only to secure the British North America - but even fact to counter United States hegemony in on the continent. Therefore rather than being conceived as a 'retreat', it was an overarching plan to challenge Federal preponderance in North America. Due to the security dilemmas arising from the Civil War the long-term nature of this scheme became unworkable and was therefore accelerated to become a short-term response to a strategic dilemma.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The following thesis offers a new interpretation of the forces and motivations which led to the Confederation of Canada in 1867, reconsidering arguments about the effects of the American Civil War and the role of the British government and in the coming of unification. Specialist studies of the events leading to the British North America Act have

almost exclusively been written in terms of how unification was experienced – and effected – by the provinces themselves, while diplomatic and political accounts of Britain in the Civil War generally overlook the vital position of Canada. On occasions when histories do touch on the imperial view of unification, it is normally regarded as a 'withdrawal' stimulated by a realisation of US dominance on the continent.¹ This thesis will display that these interpretations do not stand up to scrutiny. Canadian-centric histories of confederation underplay the British role and the larger strategic issues at stake, while notions of military 'withdrawal' oversimplify the imperial aims of the unification policy.

Confederation began as an imperial plan to offset the spread of Federal republicanism in North America and in this respect, far from being a withdrawal or retreat, was a concerted attempt to nurture a balance of power on the continent. This was a long-term project considered to be attainable in the antebellum era when, as will be shown, in itself US military capability held little concern for British statesmen. Overwhelming Federal militarisation however and difficulties afflicting relations with the United States between 1861 and 1865 drastically upset this sense of relative military assuredness, leading the imperial government to appeal to unification long before it had intended. At the same time Confederation was adopted as a policy to impress some of the responsibility for defence onto the North American provinces themselves. While this necessity was intensified by the Civil War, the imperative to reduce Britain's military commitment to the provinces - and indeed possessions across the empire - was an ongoing process that predated the 1860's. It was motivated by the need to economise, as well as realisation that British power would find itself spread dangerously thin if engaged in crises or conflicts in different parts of the globe. Imperial policy held that increased autonomy, as well as the establishment of a larger central government, would increase the sense of colonial responsibility for this greater state's protection. Britain would continue to support the provinces, primarily with its sea power,

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Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815 – 1908*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 302-3.

however defence on the ground would be provided for by the new unified government. In this sense Confederation was not 'abandonment', and was only a 'withdrawal' in the sense that local security would be incumbent on the colonies.

British North American unification therefore was favoured as a gradual policy both for challenging the United States as a regional power and for reducing Britain's continental commitment. These may appear as divergent and even contradictory aims - and perhaps lacked realism - however this thesis will argue that the imperial government believed them viable due to the essential military equilibrium in North America. The feeling of relative security was destroyed by the growth of American power in the Civil War and therefore severely intensified the urgency of their achievement. It will be contended that the long term strategy of achieving British North American strength through unification transformed into a short term answer to a strategic dilemma.

This argument challenges the prevalent interpretation in most histories of Confederation which are generally Canada-centric in their scope. The common arguments as to why British North American union came about are that the Canadian coalition government pioneered a scheme for provincial union in order to unshackle themselves from the political instability in their own legislature and that this plan was accepted by the various provincial communities due to the perceived benefits that union would bring. These primary benefits were the facilitation of interprovincial trade, improved defence, enablement of expansion to the Northwest, and the building of a continental or 'intercolonial' railroad. The dominant interpretation of Confederation has commonly been that while the British supported it, the politicians in the colonies themselves driven by these goals did the most to achieve union. A recurring historiographical problem with accounts of Confederation therefore has been a tendency to examine it from the provincial perspective rather than the imperial, or indeed, as a shared experience. This partiality towards the Canadian role may in part be explained by the fact that some of the most influential texts, for instance Donald Creighton's *The Road to Confederation* (1964) and W.L. Morton's *The Critical Years: The*

Union of British North America (1967), were written to coincide with the centenary of Confederation's accomplishment, and therefore emphasise – and hugely acclaim – politicians in the colonies as great statesmen and nation-builders, an approach also true of a group of biographies written in this era.

The triumphalism of these accounts can also be attributed to the fact that, not only had the 1960s brought the hundred-year anniversary of Confederation, but had witnessed a period of political unrest within the French Canadian communities, encouraging a nationalistic agenda in writing about the birth of modern Canada.² This is one reason for Britain's role in, and rationale for, British North American union being overlooked in the literature. On a more practical level these studies are often limited in terms of imperial considerations due to the fact that, in light of their focus, their source material is predominantly Canadian. When British sources are consulted it understandably tends to be the records of the Colonial Office and on occasions the Foreign Office. As will be argued here, from Britain's point of view Confederation was, under the strains of the time, a political manoeuvre with a largely strategic motivation and therefore the imperial role can better be appreciated through the added consultation of War Office and Admiralty files.

The historiography on Confederation too, can reflect an unconscious bias due to the era works were written in. Robin Winks for example in *The Civil War Years: Canada and the United States* (1960) examined the crises facing the province in the 1860s and subsequently challenged the persistent myth of British North America's 'undefended frontier' in the 1800's. Winks attributed its persistence in the literature to a dominant twentieth century factor: the two World Wars.³ Similarly scholarly appreciation of the difficult relations between Britain and the Union during the conflict were arguably for a long time stifled by the Anglo-American

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Phillip Bucknor in Ged Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837-67*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), p. 4.

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Robin Winks, *The Civil War Years: Canada and the United States*, 4th ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. xvii.

rapprochement of the twentieth century and an emphasis on British-American co-operation. Similarly much of the bibliography of British imperial defence can be argued to have been unduly influenced by subsequent history. The pervading influence of the First World War draws academic inquiry to the rising strategic challenge of a unified Germany and leads to neglect of the issues Britain faced with older nineteenth-century competitors such as the United States.

This is perhaps one element of why historical studies have not more regularly considered the imperial aspect of Britain in the American Civil War. Another explanation may be the fact that the unique military history of the Civil War itself preoccupies historians. Indeed few conflicts are so widely written about, in part attributable to the drama, tragedy and romance perceived in mercurial figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee, and clashes such as Gettysburg and Appomattox. It might also be speculated that as Confederation (when it is mentioned in an imperial context) is generally seen as an ignominious British withdrawal from North America, UK historians are put off by a potentially inglorious chapter in colonial history. Nonetheless the following study argues that the paradigm of Confederation as an imperial policy driven forward by the Civil War can only be considered with reference to the interplay between British-American relations, colonial defence, and continental union. In order to contextualise this thesis it is therefore necessary to briefly discuss the main bibliographical works which relate to the main elements in play, divided broadly between diplomatic studies of Britain and the Civil War, military/strategic studies, and histories of Confederation itself.

Diplomatic studies

Studies of Anglo-American relations in the Civil War often focus on the question of potential British intervention and recognition of the South, one of the historiographical controversies over British policy being whether the imperial government tacitly supported the Confederacy as a means to establish a new North American balance of power through an independent Southern nation. Ephraim Adams's *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (1924) was one of the first diplomatic studies and this was the question Adams set out to investigate⁴, also investigated by Donaldson Jordan and Edwin Pratt in their study of Old World reactions to the conflict *Europe and the American Civil War* (1931). Adams found the answer to this in the negative, referring to the British struggle over extending the electoral franchise, and argued that the Civil War triumph of the North had a signal effect by giving validation to broad-based democracy. R.J.M. Blackett reached a similar conclusion in *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (2001), describing the fillip that Union victory gave to abolitionists and reformers. In assessing that the imperial government did not seek to aid the dismantlement of the United States however Ephraim Douglass Adams observed a continuity of British policy. Contextualising Britain's geopolitical outlook prior to the Civil War Adams declared that Britain had come to acquiesce in US continental dominance⁵, a judgement that Kenneth Bourne later reached as well. It will be contended that the imperial government continued to aim at the restriction of Federal growth right up to and including the Civil War, particularly as a means to secure British North America outside of the United States. Indeed, the Confederation of Canada was an antebellum policy intended to nurture a balance of power in the region and emerged from a long gestation period in 1864-1867 in response to a startling and rapid growth of Federal military capability.

Howard Jones too examined the possibility that Britain might have perfidiously attempted to alter the continental balance by intervening on the South's behalf, both in

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Ephraim Douglas Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006), p. 7.

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Ibid., p. 15.

Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War (1992) and the more specialist study of abolitionism's effect on transatlantic relations *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union & Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War* (1999).⁶ *Union in Peril* however appeared unable to resolve why an interventionist policy did not come into being and there is confusion in the arguments including the significance or otherwise of emancipation. This study will argue that the prime issue preventing British intervention was the fear of war with the Union, particularly considering the prospect of facing a military calamity in British North America.

Unfortunately Jones - perhaps hamstrung by his own remit to convey the importance of diplomacy - like Adams did not enter into discussion of British North American defence or the general imperial security concerns arising from the Civil War. Comprehension of the key question of British North American security also suffers within many studies of Anglo-American relations in the Civil War, limited as they are by a diplomatically-oriented selection of sources. The confines of Jones's focus, drawing his British sources exclusively from the records of the Foreign Office and private paper collections of the key diplomats, inhibited the scope to consider how questions of diplomacy and intervention might have been influenced by imperial defence and global strategy. Tellingly however, precisely the reverse problem occurs when considering military and strategic studies of Britain and the Civil War.

Imperial defence and strategic histories

Jeremy Black's *Fighting for America: The Struggle for Mastery in North America, 1519 – 1871* (2011) and Kenneth Bourne's influential *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815 – 1908* (1967) considered the gauntlet laid down by US power in the Civil War era to British defence-policy and global strategy, albeit while charting military

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Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 1.

developments on the continent across much broader epochs. They therefore only briefly considered the security dilemmas facing British North America between 1861 and 1865. Black's work complemented his earlier *Crisis of Empire* which highlighted that the ties between Britain and the United States have been strongest when a major, usually ideological, third-party threat has existed, for instance Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia or present day international terrorism. Black argued that in the nineteenth century imperial competition between the powers was the source of great Anglo-American antagonism on the continent. It will be argued here that in the Victorian period the bases of potential hostility also ran along more arcane lines and that the imperial government looked to resist American expansion – particularly into its own possessions – out of a concerted opposition to Republican democracy, believing it to be dangerously excessive. A large cross-section of Britain's educated classes held to the opinion that Washington was too beholden to public opinion and consequently 'governed by a mob', *The Times* for example printing sardonically in 1855 that "the American people are so free that they will not be controlled by a government of their own choosing."⁷ This cynicism and mistrust of US democracy to a degree formed the ideological conflict of the day and was one of the factors which made British statesmen recoil from US republicanism spreading over British North America.

Kenneth Bourne's work veered more towards the geostrategic issues rather than the ideological or political. Whereas Jones and Adams researched mainly in diplomatic archives, Bourne's source material was based on records of the War Office and the Admiralty files, as well as personal paper collections.⁸ As alluded to, the diplomatic issues arising from the Civil War not only had a direct bearing on the military security of British North America, but often actually arose from breaches, or alleged breaches, of British neutrality committed in the provinces. Diplomatic relations and imperial defence policy therefore were inextricably

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¹⁴ *The Times*, 10 May 1854.

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¹⁵ Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America*, p. vii.

linked. Even Bourne subsequently acknowledged that - having passed over Foreign Office documents in his research - the personal writings of diplomatists became essential to comprehending the imperial government's geostrategic outlook.⁹

Like Adams, Bourne reached the conclusion that by the 1860s Britain had largely reconciled itself to the ultimate preponderance of United States power in North America. This smoothed the transition to strong Anglo-American relations - though the process was delayed by the diplomatic problems arising from the Civil War.¹⁰ Bourne's belief that the wars of German unification might have accelerated the British-American accord was based on his assessment that American affairs were "subordinate" to concerns in Europe when formulating British foreign policy.¹¹ Likewise, in Bourne's other major contribution to the history of British politicking in the nineteenth-century *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England* Bourne emphasised that Europe remained Britain's largest security concern. The need to preserve its important markets required ensuring that a rival power did not attain political dominance over the continent and control of its vital military bases. Bourne argued that this preoccupation with European matters helped speed Britain's acknowledgement of US hegemony in North America. The following thesis argues that Britain's acceptance of US dominance was less straightforward and that the imperial policy of uniting British North America was actually born in the antebellum period out of defiance to Republican growth.

In *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815 – 1908* however Bourne saw the *Trent* affair as the vital watershed for Britain's position on the continent. Only mentioning Confederation in passing and not entering into any comprehensive discussion on it, Bourne described union as a political resort in order to complete the military 'withdrawal'

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Ibid., p. x.

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Ibid., p. 205.

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Ibid., p. 407.

from the continent.¹² It will be contended that Bourne misunderstood the imperial rationale for unification. The British aim of making the provinces undertake a greater share of the duty for defence was a central part of the union policy and, though predating the Civil War, was greatly intensified by the problems of colonial security emerging from it. Therefore the Canadian reticence to take measures towards defence should not be considered as the 'excuse' for the imperial policy of confederation, but a fundamental reason behind it.

Scholars in the Bourne camp however have seen the unification of British North America as evidence of imperial 'retreat' in the face of Federal militarism.¹³ It will be shown that, as much as Britain indeed turned to confederation due to the pressures arising from the American conflict, that the view of unification as 'retreat' or 'withdrawal' requires some modification. Confederation began as a concerted policy to challenge United States dominance – before Federal power truly found expression through the Civil War. When this radical transformation took place between 1861 and 1865, unification became less about long-range planning than about enacting the scheme before a potential military disaster took place in British North America.

These advances in American capabilities since the countries had last been at war were made clear in an 1865 report on Canadian defence composed by Captain J. L.A Simmons. Simmons summarised America's crucial logistics advantages and general advances in manpower since the War of 1812, stating that: "these changes consist in a vast increase of population in the United States, from 10,000,000 to 31,000,000; in the construction of railroads and communications by which armies can be supplied and move in directions and with a rapidity which before was impossible." Moreover, it was not only Federal logistics which had undergone a marked revision through the Civil War, but the

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Ibid., pp. 302-3.

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Howard J. Fuller, "The Absence of Decisive Results: British Assessments of Union Combined Operations" in Craig L. Symonds, ed., *Union Combined Operations in the Civil War*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 126.

quality of their armies. As will be seen, contrasting vividly with the derisory appraisals of the Northern 'hired hands' perceived to be manning the Union forces early in the Civil War, later reports warned of the great strides and improvements made in their operational abilities. Simmons described for example "the development of a numerous and highly efficient army, commanded by generals who ... have acquired, in four years of warfare on a scale such as seldom been exceeded, a larger war experience than the great majority of the generals of Europe, and have, by the operations which they have conducted, proved themselves adepts in strategy and very skilful tacticians."¹⁴ That Confederation was essentially a political response to a military problem however is a fundamental point, and brings us back to the premise that a fuller understanding of the imperial response to the Civil War necessitates contemplation of War Office and Admiralty sources *as well as* records of the Foreign and Colonial Offices.

This is further substantiated by the fact that analysts of nineteenth-century imperial defence have often argued that protection was not achieved by conventional military readiness but by deterrence and diplomacy. Andrew Lambert for example has concluded in essays such as "The Royal Navy, 1856-1914: Deterrence and the Strategy of World Power" (1995) and "Royal Navy and the Defence of Empire" (2008), that colonial security was provided for not by local defences, but by the prevention of war in the first place through the coercing effect of British sea power.¹⁵ Consequently the Civil War's most serious international incident the *Trent* affair was seen by Lambert not only as a diplomatic victory for Britain, but also as evidence that the Anglo-American power relationship firmly favoured the British Empire.¹⁶

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J. L. A Simmons, , *Defence of Canada Considered as an Imperial Question with Reference to War with America*, (London, 1865), p. 24.

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Andrew Lambert, *Royal Navy and the Defence of Empire*, in Greg Kennedy, ed., *Imperial Defence: The Old World Order, 1856 – 1956*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), p. 123.

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Lambert argued therefore that this “deterrent strategy” was prosecuted successfully by Britain during the Civil War and goes so far as to argue that the United States did not pose a significant threat to Britain at the time of the conflict. Lambert found in the strategic picture facing Britain justification for Kenneth Bourne’s argument in terms of the European preoccupation of foreign policy.¹⁷ This assertion that British North American security rested safely on deterrence was a manifestation of Lambert’s argument that British naval superiority - as opposed to military strength on the ground - provided a dependable hands-off warning to any hostile powers threatening imperial possessions.¹⁸

The present study will challenge this assertion and argue that, while the Royal Navy previously had afforded British leaders a sense of security in their dealings with the US, by 1864 if not earlier this had changed. Due to Federal army and navy expansion, technological developments, fractious relations with the Union and a resulting British anxiety about going to war; the imperial government found it did not possess this ‘irresistible diplomatic weight’ in dealing with the United States. A sense of panic over the need to erect fortifications in Canada as the Civil War drew to a close - and hence an increased imperial vigour over achieving Confederation – provided evidence of a confidence crisis in Britain over the limitations of the security offered by the Royal Navy. It was summed up as early as February 1862 in a crucial report made to the War Office by the inspector-general of fortifications Colonel Burgoyne. Comparing the problems British North America faced to the colonies of Australia, Burgoyne wrote: “that any of our colonies can obtain absolute protection from our Navy is a fallacy. The only foreign possessions that can take absolute care of themselves are the Australian settlements; they have so large a British population and so much wealth; while they are too far removed from any possible enemy to be attacked by any force sufficiently considerable for their conquest.” With the chief source of deterrence, British sea

Ibid., p. 123.

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Ibid., p. 114.

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Ibid., pp. 111-24.

power nullified, concern centred on defence on the ground and in the case of the North American provinces the perennial issue was with who should rest the responsibility for defence, Burgoyne going on to describe that the Canadian people did not believe it right to commit the provinces' own revenues towards security.

Lambert's conviction however that British power provided sufficient leverage for the imperial government to maintain its position in relation to the United States were echoed by Brian Holden Reid in his article "Power, Sovereignty and the Great Republic: Anglo-American Diplomatic Relations in the Era of the Civil War". Holden Reid refuted arguments such as those of Kenneth Bourne that Britain undertook a 'withdrawal' in the face of Federal pressure, and concurred with Lambert's view of a strong-armed and effective British diplomacy.¹⁹ It will be argued here that the maintenance of peace with the United States was more complex than simply deterrence based on the power of the Royal Navy. The North's climb-down over the Trent incident for instance can be attributed, not necessarily to fear of the Royal Navy of itself, but the fact that it stood to lose the South if becoming embroiled with Britain.

British perceptions and assessments of their predicament in the North Atlantic were necessarily influenced by their standing in Europe. Here Holden Reid's analysis again deviated from that of Bourne, in that while both emphasised the prioritising of European affairs, Holden Reid considered this to be evidence that Britain felt secure in its position in North America. The following thesis contends that these issues - particularly arresting the growth of Russia and defences in the colonies - were inextricably linked to the problems Britain faced in North America. The severe requirement for improved fortifications in Canada – in spite of Lambert's suggestion that such defences were essentially redundant in view of the deterrent effect of the Royal Navy – led to a divisive debate in England about British

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Brian Holden Reid, "Power, Sovereignty and the Great Republic: Anglo-American Diplomatic Relations in the Era of the Civil War", *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, (June 2003), p. 47.

North American security in 1865 and was a direct outcome of the problem posed by Federal mobilisation and uncertain diplomatic relations with the North. These issues are significant because the reluctance to pay for defensive works that the home government felt should fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces themselves was a fundamental part of the British policy on Confederation. The imperial goal of unification had always been based on the notion the new central assembly would assume increased responsibility for security – and by May 1865 British support had already been conferred for the 'Quebec Resolutions' whereby Article 67 explicitly stated that the new united legislature would undertake all measures for local defence. As a result the imperial government initially wished Confederation to be completed first and the defence negotiations to be conducted after. The security crisis that sprung from imminent Federal conquest of the South however rendered this ultimatum unworkable and led to the fortification debates – further evidence that Britain did not seriously mean to abandon the provinces. It is also worth noting that in spite of the accusations of a lack of urgency, the appropriation for the building of the defences at Quebec was voted for by the imperial parliament.

Histories of Confederation

In *The Civil War Years: Canada and the United States* Winks took a different stance on these issues of Canadian defence readiness, deterrence of the US, and imperial support for Confederation. Winks argued that provincial determination to resist annexation provided a warning to the Federals in the wake of the *Trent* affair and that the imperial government's acceptance of union owed not to the winter crisis of 1861-2 but to the Confederate attempts to embroil Britain by launching a raid into Vermont from Canada in October 1864.²⁰ It will be contended here that the *Trent* crisis was far more impactful than Winks suggests, and that far from galvanising British North Americans into defensive action, the incident reinforced a view in Canada that any resort to conflict would result from failed diplomacy between Britain

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and the US (the type of diplomatic crisis Winks wrongly dismisses as existing in the *Trent* affair) and therefore that it would be Britain's responsibility to wage war and not Canada's. Within months of the crisis moreover the Canadian government stood down over the defeat of a bill to reconstitute its local militia – hardly evidence of a galvanised defence – and this played a major part in imperial-provincial relations and, again, British desire to unify the provinces. The more critical discrepancy with Winks's argument therefore is his assertion that the St. Albans incident helped gain Colonial Office backing for British North American unification. The following study will display that while the raid had an effect in securing provincial backing for union, imperial sponsorship both predated October 1864 and rather stemmed from the more long-standing ideological and strategic motivations alluded to.

Nonetheless in another seminal work on Confederation, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America*, W. L. Morton concluded that unification and defence were not so linked by the imperial government. It is challenged here that British effort to 'define and limit' their defence commitment were part of the same policy that drove the imperial wish for union. It was not the case that Britain would withdraw its military support, allowing the provinces to fall to the United States and relinquishing any chance for them to become united: rather Confederation was a measure encouraged by the imperial government to improve their defensibility against any hostile incursions from the US to begin with. Increased security would theoretically stem from greater responsibility being taken by the new central British North American government. It is argued therefore that the term 'withdrawal' is too simplistic - when used as Morton does here - to assert that British policy was a basic fear-driven response to American power. Morton's suggestion that Britain would contemplate abandoning the provinces and therefore jeopardise the unification scheme represents a Canadian-centric view of Confederation, in that it implies that the motivation to effect union existed primarily with the colonies themselves. On top of this Morton's tendency to portray union as a Canadian 'success story' led him to emphasise the obstacles and challenges Canada faced whether real or, at times, imagined. Morton for instance, having

suggested that the Canadian delegation surmounted the obstacle of potential British 'withdrawal' in order to proceed with the scheme for union, then claims that the added impediment existed of a shortage of time.²¹ This study will argue that even against the divisive backdrop of the crisis over reform British statesmen across all party and political lines were determined to affect British North American union at an early juncture.

Similar observations can be made of Donald Creighton's *The Road to Confederation* which charted the coming of British North American union in terms of the political experience and problems of the provinces themselves. In mapping out the provincial journey Creighton's analysis relied almost exclusively on Canadian archives and did not integrate Foreign, Colonial or War Office sources. That the paradigm of the imperial response to the Civil War was neglected is clear in that Creighton's analysis begins in 1863, the year following the *Trent* affair and the intervention crisis. Creighton's narrative in particular is celebratory in its account of how the "Fathers of Confederation" overcame scepticism and resistance from the parochial local legislatures of the Maritime Provinces as well as the imperial government. These 'anti-confederates' are dismissed as insular and reactionary while the unionists who favoured Confederation are portrayed as great visionaries and statesmen. Creighton argued that the coalition government of Canada had settled on continental unification as a solution to the 'deadlocked' political struggle between Upper and Lower Canada, joined in legislative union since 1838. The Upper Canadians, led by Toronto newspaper proprietor and reform politician George Brown had become consistently frustrated at the system of equal representation in the united assembly despite their far greater (and still rapidly expanding) population. Brown headed up the coalition with conservative John A. Macdonald Brown and having adopted the policy of confederation to dispense with their failing provincial legislature they crossed the Atlantic to gain imperial assent in what Creighton termed in a chapter title an "Appeal to Caesar".

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Ibid., p. 203.

Like Morton's therefore, Creighton's work presents Confederation as a triumph against the odds, if not a miracle. A classic example of this can be seen in a passage looking to illustrate the obstacles that Canada had to overcome in which Creighton argues that staunch resistance from the Maritime colonies combined with the 'problem' of convincing Britain that union must be adopted, the metaphorical 'appeal to Caesar'.²² Creighton's incredulity at the home government's ready acceptance of the union scheme fitted one recurrent technique for lauding the Canadian unionists. This was to portray the British governing classes as staunchly against empire (or at least hamstrung by those who were), or alternatively apathetic and even ignorant towards imperial questions. This included the key members of the colonial service.²³ This thesis will challenge that such conventional views of imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century are overly simplistic. While a faction (of whom William Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer was the highest profile) wished to lessen Britain's colonial responsibilities, the broad-based approach was to 'fit' the colonies for eventual independence by the gradual cession of self-government and to part with them *only* when their people were conducive and their institutions sufficiently developed to allow them to stand alone. This was not only to prevent again the creation of a vacuum that might be commercially or militarily exploited by rival powers, but also, by the parting being amicable, to give Britain valuable allies in future conflicts.

At the same time, the cabinet remained dominated by the giants of the previous generation Russell and Palmerston, men who considered the relinquishment of imperial power detrimental to Britain's status in the world. Imperial power gave Britain a sense of rank that Palmerston as Prime Minister was particularly unwilling to allow to be compromised. When in 1864 British North American security came under intense scrutiny as the Federals gained the upper hand in the Civil War, Palmerston told Russell "We have those colonies

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Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation, The Emergence of Canada: 1863 – 1867*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1964), p. 270.

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Ibid., p. 55.

and cannot abandon them without disgrace and dishonour, ministerial and national, and we must do our best to defend them in co-operation with their inhabitants.” Palmerston’s language was revealing as it illustrated his feeling that it was not only patriotic pride that depended on standing by the empire, it was also a very *personal* obligation: loss of British North America could not be countenanced without “ministerial” dishonour. This notion of imperial rank and duty therefore could be used by Palmerston if opposed by radicals or liberals, and public support could usually be counted upon as one’s ‘position’ was paramount in the Victorian era. Russell too warned not only of this damage that would be done to Britain’s reputation in the world but also a potential domino effect across other British possessions if the North American provinces fell to the United States: “The loss of any great portion of our colonies would diminish our importance in the world & the vultures would soon gather together to despoil us of other parts of our Empire, or to offer insults to us which we could not bear.”²⁴ Despite assertions in the literature therefore that the home country wished to cast off the provinces, a consensus in Britain including Palmerston and Russell supported Confederation based on its pre-Civil War objective of conserving British North America outside of the United States.

What all this ultimately shows is that there is discrepancy over Britain’s motivations for endorsing unification. Histories variously argue that the imperial government made the colonies’ acceptance of the union scheme a proviso for continued military assistance; and/or that the same imperial support for Confederation was a means to allow Britain to ‘abandon’ or ‘withdraw from’ from the continent. Ged Martin highlighted this anomaly in *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation 1837 – 67* (1995)²⁵ This thesis will argue that again, such polarised interpretations are overly simplistic, and that Confederation was, from the imperial point of view, essentially a balancing act between the two. The key is that Britain

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Russell to Grey, 19 August 1849, 8A.

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 238.

regarded union as a measure to make the colonies assume more responsibility for security, and *threatened* to withhold imperial aid to bring this about. The imperial government fully intended to continue to guarantee the provinces' territorial integrity but predominantly with the support of the Royal Navy; local defence had to be orchestrated by the colonies on the ground. It was therefore not a simple case of one or the other – that the provinces sign up to confederation to preserve imperial protection, or refuse it and be abandoned. Confederation was intended as a means to safeguard British North America's position in the empire and certainly its independence from the United States; but through increased self-government relieve much of the imperial burden of defending it. Both of these objectives had assumed an intensified significance by the growth of Federal power and diplomatic friction with the North through the Civil War.

By contrast, in *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation* Ged Martin argued that historians of British North American unification are overly swayed by the background of the US conflict.²⁶ Indeed, Martin claimed that all of the recurrent interpretations of why unification came about are open to question. Martin argued against taking the pronouncements of the Fathers of Confederation at face value.²⁷ Martin therefore placed greater emphasis on political expediency for the leaders of the Canadian coalition. Martin believed that George Brown's overriding concern was with achieving electoral justice for the numerically superior peoples of Upper Canada either through continental union or failing that simply a Federal reformation of the two Canadas with the new assembly reconstituted on the basis of 'representation by population'. John A. Macdonald, Martin contended, needed the greater confederation to secure his own diminishing political career.

Refuting Morton and Creighton's assertions that the Fathers of Confederation faced crippling opposition in the Atlantic Provinces which led them to launch a noble appeal to the

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Ibid., p. 82.

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Ibid., p. 6.

mother country, Martin challenged that Maritime opposition was not as extensive as Canadian histories have claimed and in fact it was a close split between unionists, anti-unionists, and those who were undecided that allowed Confederation to eventually be embraced in the Maritime Provinces. According to Martin this was necessary as the imperial government possessed little real power with which to impose its wish for unification on self-governing colonies such as Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.²⁸ In this respect Martin contended that the British contribution to achieving union is better described as “context and support” rather than “pressure and command.”²⁹ The following thesis will display that the imperial role was more dynamic, and even proactive, in making Confederation a reality.

Summary

It can be seen that a variety of historiographical factors have influenced academic consideration of Britain’s role in accomplishing Confederation as a response to the problems of the American Civil War, such as the changing circumstances of international relations in with Britain and the United States firm twentieth century allies or the tendency of Canadian histories to promote the British North America Act as a triumph of Canadian nation-building and national identity. This has been the case in key studies of Confederation such as W.L Morton’s *The Critical Years* and Donald Creighton’s *The Road to Confederation*.

At the same time, the home government’s policy towards British North America has also been overlooked as most of the literature on Britain n the conflict has been concerned with the diplomatic issues that arose between London and Washington, generally focusing on the *Trent* affair or the question of offering mediation and possible recognition to the Confederacy. The majority of these works, including influential texts such as Ephraim Douglass Adams’s *Great Britain and the American Civil War* and Howard Jones’s *Union in*

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Ibid., p. 31.

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Ibid., p. 296.

Peril: the Crisis over European Intervention in the Civil War - include little on the critical question of the provinces. There has been neglect over how the Civil War affected British policy in relation to the defence of the empire and other British interests, ironic as both the diplomatic friction with Washington and the postulations on recognising the South (which were not mutually exclusive) categorically threatened to bring the empire into a state of war and lead to a US invasion of Canada.

Part of the reason for these historiographical shortcomings has been a tendency to restrict the focus of research to sources of the Foreign Service, while the reverse applies to strategic studies. The latter is a particular issue in that, as colonial security relied in part on diplomacy and deterrence, purely military data provides an incomplete picture of the nature of imperial defence policy, a factor in Kenneth Bourne's *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815 - 1905*. Scholarly works on imperial defence also tend to overlook British North America, while specialist studies of Canadian Confederation understate the military/strategic imperial issues that influenced British policy on union. In this respect all of these genres of imperial history have at times suffered from being based on research carried out exclusively on one side of the Atlantic or the other.

The methodology of this study has been to consult documents of both the Foreign and Colonial Offices; and the Admiralty and War Offices. In addition to British sources it has also been based on archival collections in the United States, and crucially, Canada. The latter is particularly illuminating in providing first-hand accounts from imperial representatives in the provinces: the Governor General at Quebec and the lieutenant governors in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and revealing the nature of their transaction with the provincial politicians. The chapters that follow will display that the salient arguments over how and why Confederation took place are misinterpreted. Histories of Confederation are largely Canada-centric and claim the cause to be a range of domestic political forces of which security against the Federal menace was just one strand; also that the Canadian coalition were the chief architects of union and had to petition the imperial

government for its support. This thesis will contend that Britain played a much more important and dynamic role in coming of union and that the American Civil War was indeed the decisive factor. In spite of the common interpretation in the literature however, it will be argued that the matter was not as clear-cut as a simple imperial withdrawal as unification had its genesis before the conflict as a long term challenge to Federal power. For the purpose of comprehending some of the sources it may be necessary to note that British people occasionally spoke colloquially of 'Canada' when in fact referring to all of the provinces of British North America, much in the same way that commentators on both sides of the Atlantic often referred to 'England' as opposed to 'Britain'.

CHAPTER 2

THE ANTEBELLUM ERA

As the issues that led to the Civil War developed British North America stood, in many respects, as Britain's greatest colonial possession.³⁰ The Atlantic Provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, while smaller than their illustrious neighbour, nevertheless constituted a vast land area and were making similar economic and political progress. By comparison for example, India was lucrative but the recent Mutiny suggested a bout of costly racial, cultural and religious clashes. As well as this the Indian subcontinent was critically underdeveloped in contrast to the bastions of British North America: Montreal, Toronto and Quebec. Australia too by the early 1860s was largely undeveloped, while New Zealand was afflicted by ongoing Maori wars. Britain's other imperial possessions in the mid nineteenth century were mostly frontier outposts and military/naval bases along trade routes and strategic supply lines. Britain's greatest imperial assets had been the original Thirteen Colonies and following their loss the next most valuable in terms of national development was the remainder of British North America.

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Morton, *The Critical Years*, p. 1.

The point to this is to illustrate that it is surprising that in the literature it has often been portrayed that Britain was keen to jettison the North American provinces. It may be attributed to a prevailing interpretation that the imperial government became careworn by the problem of protecting British North America from the United States. Within influential diplomatic histories like that of Ephraim Douglass Adams and strategic studies such as that of Kenneth Bourne it was claimed that Britain came to reconcile itself to American continental dominance by the 1850s. In histories of Canadian Confederation such as Creighton's important work, it was argued that a "little-England" mentality shaped British policy. The perception may stem from what was a growing ambivalence in Britain to the responsibilities of protecting overseas territories due to the reasons touched on in the introduction: it drained the imperial exchequer of funds for defence and offered rival powers opportunities to attack Britain in its extremities – Canada being an obvious case in point.

It is true that the surrender of what became the United States had placed the rest of the British North American colonies into a unique strategic problem. Whereas normally the primary security concerns facing Britain in the colonies were internal rebellion or protecting them from fellow European imperial powers, the provinces also shared a lengthy land border with a rising continental power which: had made regular allusions to annexation of the provinces; had invaded during the War of Independence and War of 1812; and had aided rebellion in 1837-38.³¹ The American acquisition of the strip of land between New Brunswick and Quebec was always a source of great angst for Britain's Prime Minister in the era of the Civil War. Palmerston wrote that "The United States wanted the disputed territory because it intervenes between New Brunswick & Canada; because it affords a stepping Stone towards the object which they have long avowed as one of their fixed aims, the Expulsion of British authority from the Continent of America."³² Indeed, Maine was described as a "projecting

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Winks, *The Civil War Years*, p. xvi.

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Palmerston to Lord Monteagle, 28 October 1842 in Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England 1830 – 1902*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 258.

incisor tooth" into British North America. Maine's position, politics and conduct would play a key role in imperial insecurities over the provinces.

In the antebellum period however, Britain essentially felt assured and even confident over the empire in North America. All of the previous attempts at making Republican inroads into the provinces however had failed. Since the War of 1812 the United States had only maintained a small standing army, their state and territorial militias were considered derisory in Britain, and the Great Lakes had been, and remained, demilitarised under the Rush-Bagot Treaty of 1817. One caveat must be placed on Britain's relative sense of security: the fear that war with a European power would pin down imperial forces in other theatres and offer the US the opening it did not otherwise possess. As Bourne wrote, in spite of Britain's general feeling of security, "The one great exception, the one great fear of government after government, was one of a coalition of her enemies, and especially one of Europe and America."³³ The Concert of Europe however had kept the continent essentially secure for forty years, and when Britain did go to war again in the Crimea, peace was kept with the United States - even in spite of a tense diplomatic row over the Crampton Affair. By this time too British statesmen could observe that the internal travails in the United States preoccupied the Federal Government with its own security concerns. If Canada was truly considered a 'hostage' to United States power, it might legitimately be questioned why the imperial government did not request a King's ransom from the Federal Government and allow the US to purchase British North America for a vast financial sum. A rising group of reformers were looking to consolidate the Empire, most notably in the late-1850s Gladstone, who in his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer sought to economise Britain's imperial commitments. Britain could after all still keep trading with the provinces just as she now did with the United States. France had sold Louisiana to the Union and by the end of the decade Russia would have followed suit with the sale of Alaska.

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The answer to this can be found, not only in the perceived worth attached to them and their present safekeeping already described, but also in the Victorian-era values of pride and prestige and resistance to the spread of American democracy. When for instance Palmerston learned of the relatively small concessions made to the United States in the Maine border settlement of 1842, he was enraged by the loss of honour and prestige which he believed undermined British influence everywhere, and the prospect that US would be encouraged that it might yet expel Britain from the continent, this even despite the fact that the treaty had gained some military advantages for Britain. Palmerston wrote "This treaty is an act of weakness & of pusillanimity, which both morally & physically helps them on toward that end; while at the same time it lowers the position of England in the opinion of all foreign nations, and is a source of weakness to us in all our dealings with every other Power."³⁴ It is too simplistic therefore to claim, as Donald Creighton did for instance in *The Road to Confederation*, that an anti-imperialist sentiment prevailed in the metropolis favouring the shedding of Britain's colonial possessions.³⁵ The leading British statesmen of the Civil War-era, such as Palmerston, were mostly bitterly opposed to wilfully surrendering imperial power. At the time of the Maine border dispute the policy of uniting the North American provinces in order to maintain their position outside of the United States had recently emerged in embryonic form. It persisted right up to and including the Civil War and therefore Adams and Bourne were wrong in concluding that in the antebellum era Britain despaired of opposing, and even challenging, Federal hegemony in North America. This chapter will show that this was the long-term aim of British policy on the continent.

The Canadian Rebellions, 1837-38

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Palmerston to Lord Monteagle, 28 October 1842 in Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England 1830 – 1902*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 258.

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Creighton, *The Road to Confederation*, p. 55.

The threat of Canada joining the United States had become prevalent during the uprisings in the then separate provinces of Upper and Lower Canada 1837-38. Disaffected British North Americans had called for admission to the United States, and their revolt was assisted by federal expansion groups beneath the border such as the 'Sons of Liberty' and 'Hunters Lodges'.³⁶ A war scare had been ridden at the time of the Canadian Rebellions: firstly when Colonial forces had violated US territory and burned an American ship (the *Caroline*) which had supporting the uprisings, and secondly when a British subject, Alexander McLeod, alleged to be one of the arsonists, was acquitted in a New York trial which carried a possible death sentence. Palmerston, at this time Foreign Minister, had taken the strongest possible line – as he usually would with the United States. On the suggestion that the US Secretary of State might proclaim the court's decision to be a state matter and that the Federal Government could not interfere with it, Palmerston criticised the American system and made clear that military action would result. The Foreign Secretary wrote to the British Minister in Washington "I presume if we tell him that in the event of McLeod's execution we should make war upon the State of New York, he would reply that in such case we should *ipso facto* be at war with the rest of the Union ... if that is so, the rest of the Union must have the means of preventing the State of New York of doing a thing which would involve the whole Union in war with England."³⁷

The more persistent issue in the aftermath of the Canadian unrest, especially given the British aversion to Federal republicanism, was the movement towards Federal annexation. Following suppression of the rebellions Britain's imperial representative in lower Canada Lord Durham was instructed to compile a report and make recommendations on the measures that the imperial government should adopt in order to subvert pro-American feeling. This essentially was to unite the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada under a

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Bourne, *Balance of Power*, pp. 75-76.

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Palmerston to Fox, private, 9 February 1841, Fox MSS., FO 97/19, National Archives, London.

legislative assembly and under one imperial representative - a new 'Governor General' of Canada; as well as to devolve greater self-government to the new provincial legislature. Combining unification with increased autonomy held several key objectives which became instructive in terms of how the imperial government would approach the provincial security right up to and including the Civil War. The purpose of union was to bring the disaffected French Canadian minority under the control of the British descended majority, while increased self-governance was intended to placate the whole, reconciling its peoples to the imperial connection.

While granting Canada relative autonomy was in part designed to keep the province aligned to Britain, there was an obvious dichotomy at work in that with every concession of self-government the province was moved a step closer to independence. As alluded to in the introduction, colonial separation was only endorsed when imperial possessions had been raised to sufficient strength to safeguard their independent existence. At present the colonies could not be let go because of the annexationist threat and therefore gradual concession of autonomy - while through unification enlarging the provinces' jurisdiction – was intended to *build* the provinces' readiness while they remained under the imperial umbrella. This formed a crucial part of The Durham Report, the lieutenant governor deeming it essential to maintain the imperial link, hoping that a larger political entity would cultivate a national feeling based on Canada's monarchical links and history, and thus undermine any leanings towards the United States. Thus Lord Durham was "so far from believing that the increased power and weight which would be given to these Colonies by union would endanger their connexion with the Empire, that I look to it as the only means of fostering such a national feeling throughout them as would effectively counterbalance whatever tendencies may now exist towards separation."³⁸ In giving Canada increased domestic governance therefore British policy was to attempt to build its allegiance to the mother country – and its strength - at least to the extent that it would not fall prey to the United States. Imperial policy was not to

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obstruct Canadian separation in the long term, but rather to ensure its future position outside of the US. Commentators in the metropolis were beginning to envisage the development of a pan-British North American state which might counteract the strength of the United States. The *Morning Post*, the journal that would become a mouthpiece of Palmerston in his role as Prime Minister in the 1860's, posited this outcome of unification asking, "Would not the consolidation of a British North American Union be a good check on the growth of United States superiority?"³⁹

The military balance

Indeed, following the warning of the Canadian Rebellions, throughout the 1840's American efforts to rectify its borders in the northeast, northwest and south, (Maine, Oregon and Texas respectively), alerted Britain to Federal expansionism, with Palmerston particularly militant about refusing to give an inch to American claims. In the wake of the unrest therefore the aim became not merely securing British North America, but over time the enabling the emergence of a nation strong enough to actually counteract Federal growth. The Chancellor of the Exchequer Lord Brougham for example wanted to "balance the colossal empire of the United States" with an "independent, flourishing, and powerful state" in British North America.⁴⁰ The under-secretary of the Colonial Office James Stephen too stated that "a forecasting Policy would appear to suggest that provision should be deliberately, though of course unavowedly, made for the peaceful and honourable abdication of a power, which ere long it will be impossible to retain, and for raising up on the North American Continent a counter poise to the United States."⁴¹ With hindsight, believing that a

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Morning Post, 9 October 1838.

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Hansard, xl, 18 January 1838, cols 214-5.

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Hansard, clxxxv, 14 April 1837, cols 1229-49.

confederation of the provinces could match or rival the continental dominance of the US appears wildly unrealistic, particularly when the literature has generally tended to assert Federal preponderance by the middle of the century. It is true that in terms of their base assets the United States was much further along than British North America in industry, communications and even national consciousness. The relative populations (approximately 30 million as compared to 3 million) too overwhelmingly favoured the US, while immigrants from the Old World flowed more frequently to American ports than to colonial. The policy was, no doubt, to an extent abstract thinking, a theoretical solution to the problem of US regional influence in the absence of a more certain alternative. However British comprehensions must also be put in their antebellum context. The Chancellor's policy goal of creating a "balance" against the US colossus and Palmerston's forthrightness in making clear that war would result from McLeod's execution owed to another critical factor: the relative leverage they believed the military scenario afforded them.

In this respect it must be considered exactly how the imperial government believed union would be accomplished. While a consensus was already beginning to grow that a general confederation would make the provinces more secure against the United States, there was a belief that it had to be preceded by important preliminary steps. As with Upper and Lower Canada post-1838, the Colonial Office favoured the creation of smaller unions, hoping that one between the Maritime Provinces would follow that of the Canadas. These regional unions could then be assembled into a complete pan-continental British North American state. At the present time too, without significant improvement in communications the scope of the ultimate project was believed unworkable due to the expanse of the territory involved. Given both the practical engineering and logistical issues therefore, as well as the more political problem of the regionalism and parochialism of the individual provinces, this was an incremental, step-by-step policy that it was believed must come about over time. The imperial policy was bound up with the nature of provincial autonomy, in that as British North

America had essential self-government imperial leaders could not impose union upon the provinces and recognised it must develop organically. Colonial autonomy too meant that the home government wished the provinces to accept the economic brunt of building the continental railway necessary to facilitate union. Thus the need for the provinces to come to Britain's terms of acceding to the building blocks of maritime unification and financing the intercolonial railroad meant that Confederation from the metropolitan point of view had to be long term project.

The key is that British statesmen believed that time would allow this, mainly because they felt no impending military danger from the United States. The final determining factor behind continental - or indeed world - influence was perceived to be the military means of defending and projecting that influence. The Royal Navy was considered to be Britain's ultimate arbiter and this made imperial strategists confident that they could force a decision with the United States, particularly as, militarily at least; the US continued to be regarded in England as a second-rate power. When at the same time as the Canadian Rebellions local clashes known as the 'Aroostook War' took place over the position of the Maine/British North America frontier took place, Palmerston made clear the basis for his disgust over what he saw as British concession in the later settlement. Palmerston felt assured by the relative weakness of the US and that therefore the government should stand firm on British claims. Palmerson wrote that "the states of the Union are in a condition of general bankruptcy, and that does not give a fancy for maritime war to a nation who live by commerce and who have made no naval preparations whatever for a fight by sea."⁴² The subsequent belief that Britain could bring its policy to bear in North America allowed imperial statesmen to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the provinces could be nurtured into a position of regional power. The lack of militarisation on the continent by the late 1830s suggested that British North America might enjoy sufficient breathing space to eventually grow to rival the United States. This was deemed an essential goal as the more pervading worries in terms of republican

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expansionism were American conceptions of Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, though these were ideological and political tenets that had yet to find full military expression.

Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine

The concept of 'Manifest Destiny' held that US Republicanism would eventually embrace the whole of the land mass from the North Pole to Central America. Again, British opposition was founded on their ideological wish to limit 'mobocratic' Federal democracy, on the pride and prestige attached to maintaining an imperial presence on the continent, and on the strategic rationale that both of these aims were militarily attainable. The long-term aim of challenging the United States in North America therefore also relied on the very practical necessity of preserving the imperial status-quo. British strength was founded on global trade secured by the Royal Navy, and maintaining British North America was vital as this colonial network provided the bedrock of Britain's maritime power. Sir William Young stated in a speech printed in *The Times* in 1838, "our colonial possessions were the nursery of our commercial marine; our commercial marine was the foundation of our Royal Navy; and it was on our naval supremacy that the pride and majesty of England depended."⁴³ As little stall was afforded to US armed forces but great given to those of Britain, preserving key naval stations like Halifax and Bermuda was essential for keeping the military odds in Britain's favour. Sir Edmund Walker Head, Canada's Governor General in the antebellum decade, too said it would be disastrous "to allow the force of these Colonies and the advantages of their military position, their trade and their shipping to be transferred by any process to the Government of Washington."⁴⁴

This argument formed part of John Arthur Roebuck's manifesto over how Britain should maintain the colonies. Roebuck, who had been born in India and raised in Canada, summed up almost all of the key points: the naval imperative to preserve British North America, the fact that imperial forces should even be looking to gain the upper hand *on land*,

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The Times, 19 January 1838.

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Chester Martin, *Sir Edmund Head's First Project*, (Toronto, 1955), p. 17.

and the great democratic danger of the Republican system spreading. Roebuck wrote that “the extension of the power of the United States to the North Pole I have always considered an event fatal to the maritime superiority of England. Possessed of the St. Lawrence, the United States would, in fact, have no frontier to defend. Her offensive and defensive power would be increased by that acquisition to an extent, that would render her influence dangerous to the general liberty of the world.”⁴⁵ Consequently placing a check on Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine was about containing US power and preserving that of Britain, particularly its vital maritime strength. In positing that the United States would then “have no frontier to defend” Roebuck’s work was telling in referring to potential offensive action into the US itself, though Roebuck’s main point seems to have been that if secure by land, America would be free to build its own naval power. Roebuck’s fear for the “general liberty of the world” indicated again the common British suspicions of the American system and its expansionist intent.

Edward Watkin too, who was to help pioneer the intercolonial railway in the provinces and offer important support to the British North American union, wrote that “the dream of possessing a country extending from the Pole to the Isthmus of Panama, if not to Cape Horn, has been the ambition of the Great Republic – and it is a dangerous ambition for the rest of the world.”⁴⁶ These views furthermore pervaded the imperial government. Lord Elgin became Governor General of Canada in 1847 and it was made clear to Elgin by the Colonial Minister that British North America should become a bulwark against United States republicanism. The Colonial Secretary was Lord Grey – who would become British Minister for War in the latter stages of the Civil War – and Grey told the Governor General that “the more I see and hear of the state of affairs in the United States, the more convinced I am of

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John Arthur Roebuck, M.P. *The Colonies of England: A Plan for the Government of Some Portion of Our Colonial Possessions*, (London, 1849; reprint, London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968), p. 188 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

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Edward Watkin, *Canada and the States: Recollections, 1851 to 1886*, (London: C.F. Rowforth, 1887), p. 17.

the extreme importance of consolidating in British America a system of government not so ultra-democratic in principle as that of the great republic."⁴⁷

The Maine and Oregon boundary settlements

In the early part of the decade Britain came to negotiate a settlement with the United States of the Maine boundary question. The Whig administration had been replaced by a Conservative government under Robert Peel and Palmerston's place at the Foreign Office taken over by Lord Aberdeen. As alluded to the reason for the bartering was in various parts strategic –particularly whose territory would incorporate Rouse's Point which would be a key base for any American invasion of Canada, though this region became part of New York, not Maine - , part commercial in terms of the economic interests of Maine, and part a point of honour between the two nations which, again, Palmerston was especially determined over. Aberdeen despatched Lord Ashburton to negotiate terms of the Maine border with American Secretary of State Daniel Webster, Ashburton being selected precisely as he had both the American and financial ties to ensure an amicable settlement. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1842) relinquished much of the British claim – most significantly Rouse's Point – though Peel and Aberdeen talked up the retention of the high ground commanding Quebec and a route for an intercolonial railroad completely within imperial territory.⁴⁸ The concessions should be explained however, not by Kenneth Bourne's argument that Britain had begun to acquiesce in US predominance, but by the fact that Peel and Aberdeen were free-traders who gave commercial intercourse precedence over relatively minor military considerations or national prestige. Indeed, the surrender of Rouse's Point can equally be taken as evidence that the Peel ministry believed the United States to pose no long-term military threat despite what local tactical advantages it might accrue. In opposition

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Earl Grey to Lord Elgin, private, 11 October 1848. Elgin Papers, microfilm, Library and Archives Canada, MG24/A/16, A397.

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Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, pp. 49-50.

Palmerston was far more concerned with the maintenance of British prestige and incremental gains made by the United States. Given the feeling of relative security about US military capability, Palmerston could not countenance what he saw as a wilful and unnecessary enhancement of the American position describing “the loss of character, of moral influence, and of military Security which will result to us from this needless and gratuitous surrender.”⁴⁹

Following this however there remained controversy over the position of the Oregon Country/Columbia District boundary. Peel's cabinet again refrained from brinksmanship and accepted a modest settlement, all the disputed territory excepting Vancouver Island being given up to the US. Again, the relative concessions should be comprehended in diplomatic and economic terms rather than Britain acquiescing out of concern of American military power. Indeed, all the evidence again suggests that the imperial government believed itself to possess the better of the military balance. At one point in the dispute the British Minister in Washington Sir Richard Packenham had written to the Foreign Minister that “the fact is the Americans are much more afraid of a rupture than we are.”⁵⁰ Aberdeen replied that “our naval force in the Pacific is ample” and that “we are perfectly determined to cede nothing to force or menace”.⁵¹ Assurance naturally was provided by the Royal Navy; however British confidence also stemmed tellingly from a sense of assurance on land. This was due to the diminutive nature of the US army and its anticipated inability, as in the War of Independence and War of 1812, to seize and to hold meaningful territory in so vast an expanse as British North America. As much had been reported to the War Office by military surveyor Captain Boxer, recruited to examine defence along the St. Lawrence River. Boxer believed the

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Palmerston to Lord Monteagle, 28 October 1842, in Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, p. 257.

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Packenham to Aberdeen, private, 28 March 1844, Aberdeen papers, British Library, Add MS 43123.

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Aberdeen to Packenham, 2 April 1845, Add 4312399 fols 247-248.2222.

territorial scale of Canada and lack of Federal forces would make US logistics vulnerable, and was confident the Royal Navy would exploit resultant gaps. Boxer relayed that:

the Americans ... except assisted by money and men from foreign powers, cannot ... stand a long campaign, and as by withdrawing a large army ... to hold communications with the frontier of Canada they must weaken their forces on the seaboard materially, all their commercial cities on the Atlantic would become exposed to the attacks of such of our naval and military forces as may be directed from England against them and such diversions would of course not be neglected nor be afforded in doubtful numbers.⁵²

This reference to 'attacks of our military forces' signalled the point that not only did British strategists remain underwhelmed by Federal capabilities, but actually envisaged offensive operations on a considerable scale - "not in doubtful numbers" - into the United States. This provides further evidence against the notion of British North America being considered a 'hostage' to the power of the US. It had been supplemented furthermore by the views of the then imperial Governor General in Canada, Baron Metcalfe. If the Oregon controversy should have become recourse to war Metcalfe was equally forthright about which nation should be fighting on the front foot, writing to the Colonial Minister that Britain should "secure a speedy and honourable peace ... by invading the enemy's territory with a force so formidable as to overpower resistance, and to compel submission to the moderate terms which our country would ... be ready to grant."⁵³

The point here is not to argue that these positive and aggressive plans were necessarily militarily reasonable or sound, or that some might not have been less sanguine

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Captain Boxer, 3rd Report upon the Country in the immediate vicinity of Montreal: being the third of a series of joint reports relative to the Frontier Water and other Communications, in connection with the Military Occupation and Defence of Canada', 31 May 1845, The National Archives, London, WO 1/553.

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Metcalfe to Stanley, confidential, 4 July 1845, WO 1/ 552, no. 55.

about Britain's chances in war on land, but simply to illustrate that there existed a widespread confidence about Britain and America's relative military strength. At the same time this relative sense of security should not be confused with an eagerness to confront the United States, as Peel's government's moderation over the Maine and Oregon boundary displayed. When the US moved to annexe Texas in the mid-1840s British statesmen opposed the southern expansion for the reasons laid out, however stopped short of direct intervention. The plan of uniting British North America was a steady and measured policy to allow it to check the United States over time, believed feasible as imperial statesmen did not think the Federal Government could seize the provinces by force. At the same time Britain did not feel it had much to *gain* from military confrontation with the US, and in the economic damage that would be suffered from loss of trade both sides had much to lose.

American 'mobocracy'

That Britain and the United States could enter into conflict with each other was, to many, unfathomable. They represented the world's two most developed democratic systems, they were descended from the same ethnic stock (something Britain reflected proudly upon when acknowledging American progress), and few countries were more interconnected by trade and commerce. Mutual aggression therefore appeared suicidal. Lincoln's predecessor James Buchanan summarised it by saying: "no two nations have ever existed on the face of the earth which could do each other so much good or so much harm." There was a sense of pride in Britain at America's growth territorially and economically. An editorial article of *The Times* had said that nothing outside of Britain's direct power "exercises so great and important an influence on our welfare, and on the general progress of the world, as the character and policy of the American Government." A year later: "we have so little desire to check or impede the growth of the United States of America ... we are satisfied the rapid and successful growth of that country is of essential advantage to

ourselves, as Englishmen, and to the general interests of mankind.”⁵⁴ Sharing as they did so many political and economic values American progress in theory served to benefit Britain. In broad terms the British press could - and when it suited did - sell the American success story as a great achievement for, and display of, the ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ and therefore essentially an English success by proxy. Standing up for the United States in Britain were the radicals led by Richard Cobden, John Bright and William Forster. They were pro-American, pro-free-trade reformists of the ‘Manchester School’ and would vehemently champion the cause of the Union during the Civil War. They were three however of what was but a tiny presence of Federal supporters in parliament, while in government the fraction was smaller still.

In general therefore British feelings regarding American Republicanism were far more nuanced, particularly within the ruling classes. Colouring London’s attitude towards the US was the belief that US democracy was dangerously unrestrained. The political strife that would lead to the Civil War came to be seen in Britain as the natural outcome of this corrupt system – and to provide a warning over how the new unified British North American state should be constituted in terms of a federal or legislative structure. Palmerston especially saw the conflict as resulting from the over-empowerment of the people and the states. Strongly imbued with this prejudice against US institutions, Britain’s leader in the Civil War’s political career in particular was marked by a desire to check the power and progress of the United States. Palmerston was born in 1784 - the year the treaty granting independence to the United States was ratified - and held his first political post before the War of 1812 broke out. It was known that Palmerston had, as a young child, passed through France in the turbulent year of 1792, the experience impressing upon him the danger and chaos that could readily accompany power in the hands of the masses. The experience of the second Anglo-American conflict, as well as the struggle against the revolutionary, republican and imperial France had a marked influence on Palmerston, a political colleague stating that he “was

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launched into public life when the feeling of the whole country was bitter against them as rebellious colonists, and no man quite gets rid of his early impressions.”⁵⁵

Palmerston therefore was especially critical of the extent of popular democracy in the United States. It can be argued that this association of the French ideological threat with the American played into the military concern of a repetition of the War of 1812 whereby hostilities would arise in the North America at time of war in Europe and vice versa. This was put forward by the Duke of Wellington who could certainly draw on experience of the problem, and who summarised why the British system was so much more virtuous than the republican. Wellington wrote “we must expect that a war with the United States will not be with that Power alone. Unfortunately the Democratic Party throughout the world is inimical to this country. The reason is that our system is essentially conservative: that the freedom of the subject is founded upon law and order; which provides at the same time for the conservation of person, property, privileges, honour and character; and the institutions of the country.”⁵⁶ Therefore while Britain was reticent to clash with the United States head on – unless forced into it on a strict point of honour – a large cross-section of statesmen certainly felt that it was in the imperial interest to attempt to halt US growth as much as possible.

The Mexican War

American annexation of Texas led to the Mexican War in 1846-48 and with it renewed scrutiny over republican expansion, American military strength and the geo-strategic balance. Imperial appraisals of the military situation however remained influenced by the perceived modesty of US forces. When the United States first invaded the British

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Villiers to Bright, 25 January 1862, in Brian Jenkins, *Britain & the War for the Union*, (2 vols, London, 1974) i, p. 83.

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Wellington to Peel, 8 April 1845, Peel papers, British Library, Add MS 40461.

Minister in Washington talked up the defenders' chances, Packenham writing to Aberdeen that "the Americans greatly underrate the difficulty and expense of a war with Mexico".⁵⁷ Nonetheless American conquests in the Mexican War - which included California, New Mexico, and Texas - made continental expansionism a military fact. British statesmen however were not greatly perturbed by this American progress, particularly as the internal friction in the United States had begun to be perceived and could only be exacerbated by multiplying its territory. Post 1849 the United States persisted with its small pre-war army of 15,000 men and *The Times* for example published that "we have far more available troops than the Americans" and "are more accustomed to military movements and operations."⁵⁸ The Federal expansion nonetheless only increased the imperial drive to establish a non-republican counterweight in North America.

Kenneth Bourne therefore overstated imperial pessimism at least to an extent⁵⁹ Crucially it was a time when Britain's two major statesmen of the Civil War-era had also held the leading roles, though in reverse. Russell was Prime Minister and Palmerston had returned as Foreign Secretary. Though the US had effectively redefined its limits north, south, east and west with the Mexican cessions and relative gains made by the border settlements, the imperial government – and particularly Palmerston and Russell - continued to back imperial arms to keep British North America secure as a long-term continental rival. Bourne's allusion to the potential significance of the United States breaking apart from within was important, though rather than representing the last British hope for checking American continental dominance, in fact this internal friction in the US formed part of the general lack of concern over Federal strength that maintained imperial hopes for the provinces to form an eventual counterweight.

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⁵⁸ Packenham to Aberdeen, 28 May 1846, British Library, Add. 43123 fol. 295

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 16 August 1849.

Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, pp. 56-7.

Britain's continued confidence about checking Federal power following the Mexican War was already in part due to the increasingly evident internal rift in the US which came to temporarily forestall further American expansion to the north. Indeed, British statesmen were even already considering how in the event of a breakup of the Union the balance of power on the continent might be altered. This scenario according to Grey would allow Britain to wield "as much power by offensive & defensive alliances as under its Colonial system."⁶⁰ This allusion to "offensive" alliances reemphasises the point that British cabinet ministers were still relatively secure about American power on land and believed that scope remained for opposing it.

The aversion to American Republicanism was an important factor in the wake of the Mexican conflict, particularly in the context of a wider reaction against democratic movements which played out with the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe. Both Russell and Palmerston were imbued with the wish to maintain an imperial barrier to the United States. Indeed, far from anti-imperialist as Creighton suggested, Russell even took exception when Elgin posited the end-game of confederation might be his own administrative power as Governor General assumed by a provincial politician, with Britain maintaining a token imperial representative and military force. The Governor General wrote to Grey that "the time may come when it may be expedient to allow the Colonists to elect their own Governors ... , England withdrawing all her forces except 2000 men at Quebec & being herself represented in the Colony by an Agent – something like a Resident in India."⁶¹ These suggestions obviously represented what came to be the quintessential imperial goals of the unification scheme, to concede further self-governance to the provincial assembly and restrict the British military commitment. When the contents of this letter were relayed to Russell however, it revealed the Prime Minister's aversion to any appearance of abandoning the

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Grey to Elgin (copy), private, 27 July 1848, Elgin-Grey Papers, i, pp. 206-8.

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Elgin to Grey, private, 23 March 1850 in Elgin-Grey Papers, ii, pp. 608-9.

colonies and the importance placed on not dropping the British guard over defence. Russell wrote an uncharacteristically passionate note to the Colonial Secretary damning Elgin's suggestion and concluding "anything would be better than an elective Governor & an English Garrison of 2000 men. Better blow up Quebec & all our fortifications in Canada!"⁶² In case of doubt, the Prime Minister made explicit to Grey that his primary concern was preventing the further expansion of the American federal system, writing that "the pressing danger is that of annexation to the United States to which I could never give my consent."⁶³

Elgin certainly could not be accused of antipathy towards imperial security. He foresaw potentially disastrous consequences if the US was empowered by turning her armies north without an adequate British response, writing to the Colonial Minister "let the Yankees get possession of British North America with the prestige of superior generalship – who can say how soon they may dispute with you the empire of India and of the seas?"⁶⁴ Grey was more accommodating of the approach to gear the provinces for independence, but reemphasised the point that prior to this, Britain had to maintain and develop them until they were able to shield themselves from US republicanism. The Colonial Secretary wrote to Elgin that "as the effect of the institutions of the United States becomes more and more developed, the more dangerous I think them to the peace of the world, and I do think it of the utmost consequence that we should retain (the provinces) long enough to raise them a constitution in which they might maintain their own independence instead of being absorbed into the Union."⁶⁵ Grey in this context referred to "independence" as the ongoing granting of autonomy that would take place within the structure of the British Empire and carried out with

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Russell to Grey, 19 April 1850, Grey papers.

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Russell to Grey, 6 August 1849, Grey Papers.

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, Elgin to Grey, private, 18 May 1849, *Elgin-Grey Papers*, i, pp. 166-7.

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Earl Grey to Lord Elgin, private, 11 October 1848, Elgin Papers, MG24/A/16, A397, microfilm, Library and Archives Canada,.

the established intention of rendering them strong enough politically and commercially to keep them outside of the US.

Grey's use of the phrase "absorbed into the Union" however was also significant as, in spite of the sense of assurance about the lack of military threat, US institutional and economic development raised a concurrent worry that the provinces would inexorably enter into the United States commercial slipstream. As a result in the early to mid-1850s British statesmen felt the threat of annexation by force secondary to the more subversive economic danger. Following the Mexican War Roebuck appealed again to the establishment of a unified British North American nation to counteract the growing "empire" of the United States. The colonial theorist echoed the thoughts of Durham, Russell and Grey and called for a "new confederation ... which would prove a counterpoise to the gigantic empire and influence of the United States (whose) mighty wings seem as if about to be unfolded, and then to overshadow the whole of that vast continent, of which already she has acquired but too large a portion."⁶⁶

The Reciprocity Treaty

This formation of an economically viable British North America to discourage its people from wishing to join the United States therefore fuelled imperial ambitions for a greater continental nation to be formed out of the provinces. While a vague but broad consensus already existed that a general confederation of British North America would make the provinces more secure against the United States, there was a belief that it would be preceded by important preliminary steps. As with Upper and Lower Canada post 1838, the Colonial Office favoured the creation of smaller unions, for instance of the Atlantic Provinces, that could then be assembled into a complete pan-continental British North American state.

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Moreover at the present time the scope of the project was believed unworkable considering the incredible expanse of the territory, without significant improvement in communications.

To this end both the establishment of a sustainable commercial system and the communications and linkage to support union would be aided by the construction of a transcontinental railroad. The Canadian legislature already favoured an 'intercolonial' railway joining Canada to New Brunswick in order to improve trade opportunities and compete commercially with the northerly American states. The Maritime Provinces however were interested in a rival project flamboyantly entitled the "European and North American Railway", proposed to link Halifax to Maine. This transferred the focal point of trade opportunities to those between the Atlantic Provinces and the United States and therefore, wishing to prevent provincial dependency on the US, the imperial government preferred the scheme connecting the Maritime colonies to Canada. British statesmen endorsed this project as the valuable foundation for union, not only in the physical logistical sense, but also by forging ties and relationships in encouraging the colonies to work together. Without the railway Grey told Russell in 1849 "there was an absence of any sufficient common interests to form the ground work of the union, & there also were physical obstacles to their communication with each other which must render it practically very difficult if not impossible for any description of central authority to work."⁶⁷

In facilitating economic and political co-operation with a view to provincial union therefore the intercolonial lent itself to securing British North America's existence independent of the United States, an aim that that would also be assisted by the railway's potential use for defence. The commercial benefit was also bound up with the military in that imperial trade with the pacific colonies relied on American logistics and therefore depended on peace. Watkin asked the metropolis to "try for one moment to realize China opened to

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British commerce: Japan also opened: the new gold fields in our own territory on the extreme west and California, also within reach: India, our Australian Colonies – all our eastern Empire in fact, material and moral, dependent (as it present it too much is) upon an overland communication, through a foreign state.”⁶⁸ This issue had again yet to assume great urgency while Britain felt confident in their military capability.

In the late 1840s to early 1850s the fear surrounding the economic threat intensified when, following the repeal of the Corn Laws and loss of exclusive trade privileges with the mother country, pro-annexationist sentiment grew again in the provinces. Stewardship of the Colonial Office had been taken over by the Earl of Clarendon and in part to appease and reconcile the local populations once more Britain negotiated the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States in 1854, the first time a foreign trade agreement had been negotiated on behalf of colonial possessions. The treaty exchanged fishing rights for US seaman off the Nova Scotia and Newfoundland coasts for duty free entry of the provinces’ goods into the American market. Either or both parties would be entitled to serve notice of their intention to terminate the arrangement after ten years, with the period of notice being one year. Although reciprocity was primarily intended to address the commercial issue and the imperial government remained sanguine about the strategic situation, there was a military rationale in that local clashes over the fisheries had threatened more than once to escalate into hostilities with the US. Clarendon’s statement on the treaty therefore, though to an extent designed for effect, summed up the diplomatic and economic value when describing “this great work, which ... more than any other event of recent times, will contribute to remove all differences between two countries whose similarity of language and affinity of race, whose enterprise and industry, ought to unite them in the bonds of cordial friendship, and to perpetuate feelings of mutual confidence and good-will.”⁶⁹

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Watkin, *Canada and the States*, p. 14.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, 27 June 1854, col. 995.

In spite of this, annexationists in the United States held an alternative view of reciprocity that, far from reducing the economic motive of the provinces to desire entry into the Union, in establishing a unique commercial relationship the treaty laid groundwork for their incorporation into the Union in the future. Both their sense of military assurance and the internal troubles in the US allowed British statesmen to at present dismiss this, especially as the treaty itself served as a proxy for the developing conflict between north and south. The south predominantly opposed annexation of British North America as the provinces, entering the Union as they would as non-slave states, would tip the already perilously teetering balance in favour of the free north. The Kansas-Nebraska Act had been signed only the month before and led to the sectional violence known as “Bleeding Kansas” over whether or not the territory would admit slavery. The south therefore preferred to take the British view that the treaty strengthened the colonies’ separate identity and would place a check on what they - like many British statesmen - had come to describe as northern ‘imperialism’. On the British side commentators had predicted that the Union could not survive the vast acquisitions made following the Mexican War. Bleeding Kansas now showed the conflict attendant with establishing new states, and it seemed impossible that of all the divergent interests in the Union could hold together if the British North American provinces were added to this mix. This restriction was summed up in *The Times*, it being stated that “the Southern States would resolutely oppose any such accession of strength to their northern antagonists as must result from the junction of the Canadian provinces” and if not, “the weight thus thrown upon the northern extremity of the Union would precipitate the catastrophe so long foreboded, and snap asunder the mighty fabric at its centre.”⁷⁰

British and southern views also met on reciprocity in that it at least helped delay a growing clamour in the United States for the erection of trade barriers. These calls predominantly came from the north sustained as it was on a more industrialised, manufacturing economy while the south relied on foreign, particularly British, trade. A

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prospective tariff was therefore a further source of the imperial antagonism towards the United States – and of the tension within it - and gave yet another motivation for keeping the provinces outside of the Union. This was because whether the US imposed a protective tariff or not, as long as British North America was maintained great quantities of trade could be smuggled into the US via the ‘back door’ of the colonies. This was very important to Russell in the same way that it was felt important to preserve the ports and harbours of the provinces in order to maintain the Royal Navy and restrict American power. Keeping possession of British North America’s coastline safeguarded Britain’s export trade and held back one of its main economic rivals. The Prime Minister issued a warning to Cobden that the “imposition of a duty of 30 to 40 per cent on British manufactured goods from the Mississippi to the St. Lawrence would be a great blow to Manchester & Leeds.”⁷¹

The Crimean War

The Reciprocity Treaty had been signed in the in the midst of a steady military reduction in British North America and the month after Britain had entered the Crimean War. Gladstone was now in his first spell at the Treasury and advocated the scaling down of the imperial garrisoning commitment. Britain had not been involved in a major conflict for almost four decades and its reliance on maintaining peace through these years primarily through diplomatic compromise and the deterrence provided by the Royal Navy, left it short of troops on the ground. The imperial troop withdrawals from North America had to be accelerated in order to reinforce the East which aroused the perennial concern that preoccupation with Europe would be met with opportunism by the United States. Palmerston was Home Secretary under Lord Aberdeen’s premiership when the war broke out, and remained as intent on challenging the US - particularly in its attempts to spread its influence in Central America - as dealing with Russia. However the steady military reduction in North America

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meant that in the event of a United States attack, though the imperial government would supply what regulars it could, appeal was necessary to local forces to make up for the shortfall. Palmerston wrote to the Governor General that “there was a necessity for a clear understanding ... that ... should an invasion of Canada by foreign Powers occur, the most valuable aid to reinforcements supplied from this country would be afforded by an organized militia, such as her great population might now supply.”⁷² The Canadian legislature passed a militia law in 1855 to create a volunteer force of 5000 men to replace the regulars which displayed some action. Imperial attempts to unburden British regulars from local defence in the provinces would become an ongoing concern and reach their zenith in the Civil War the sheer scale of the American build-up was impossible for home forces to match.

The fear of invasion appeared like it might be realised however when the need for manpower resulted in the Crampton Affair, illegal recruiting activity by the British Minister in Washington Sir John Crampton which led to a potential breaking off of diplomatic relations. English observers perceived in President Franklin Pierce’s belligerent stance the common opportunism of pandering to Anglophobic feeling with Presidential elections a year away. The Foreign Minister wrote that “the President, to give himself a chance on the Democratic ticket, was obliged to perform an act of vigour, which being interpreted always means some insult to England.” The affair thus provoked more opprobrium over the nature of the republican system and enhanced the negative opinion in Britain that US democracy corrupted its foreign policy, if possible, even more than its domestic. One article in *The Times* considered that “so long as the Government is really ... acting for what it believes the interests of its subjects, so long as it really has a foreign policy, however wrongheaded and perverse, it is entitled to respect and consideration, but when its foreign policy is no policy at all, but a mere trick played off for the purpose of a coming election, we cannot but feel that there is some grave defect in the theory or working of institutions which thus permits the

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most precious interests of nations to be trifled with and blustered away.”⁷³ British sea power was sufficiently strong to send further ships to the Atlantic stations and this allowed the paper to quip “perhaps instead of reinforcing our West Indian squadron, we ought to station half-a-dozen ships at each of the ports menaced by Mr Pierce’s electioneering tactics.”⁷⁴

To colonial reformer J.R. Godley the American threat posed an even greater problem than the Russian menace and led again to the suggestion of consolidating British North America. Godley effectively summarized the growing British view that the provinces’ should, through unification, be fitted for a strong independence as a means to counterbalance the power of the United States and prevent annexation. Godley wrote to Charles Adderley - the man who as under-secretary for the colonies would be responsible for drafting the British North America Act in 1867 - that

the Statesman must be blind who does not see that the great peril which overshadows the future of the civilized world lies in the vast power and progress of the United States, coupled as their gigantic material resources are with unbounded energy and inordinate ambition. To raise up to this over-weening power a rival on its own continent, would be a work far more valuable and important to England than the curbing of the power of Russia. Such a rival as British America would be to the United States, necessarily inferior in power, would for its own sake be a faithful ally to England, for on England’s friendship and support her existence would depend. If, on the other hand, the British American States remain disunited, they must be annexed one by one to the mammoth republic.⁷⁵

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The Times, 20 November 1855.

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Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America*, p. 179; *The Times*, 27 November 1855.

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Filibustering in Central America

Though British involvement in the Crimea and the Crampton affair did not result in an American attack, there was increased American filibustering in Central America, which led to some dangerous excesses such the bombardment and sacking of the British protectorate at Greytown, modern-day Nicaragua. The United States also stepped up efforts to enforce the Monroe Doctrine in Cuba and Aberdeen's government faced pressure, not only from without over slow the progress in Russia, but also from within as Palmerston displayed his intent to challenge the US by petitioning the Foreign Office to take a firm stand against US encroachments. Clarendon was given to be forthright due to the concord with France. Referring to British and French opposition to American designs on Cuba, the Foreign Minister had stated "on the question of policy there is no part of the world in either hemisphere with regard to which we are not entirely in accord." The Foreign Minister agreed with Palmerston that deterrence was the best policy response to the US, particularly due to the volatility of the American 'mob'. Remaining steadfast about the Empire's strength, Clarendon also spoke of the effect to be had by displaying that Britain could project its power in North America at the same time that it was engaged in a struggle on the other side of the world. He wrote to the British ambassador in France that

Nothing can be worse than the doings of the United States and they think to make political capital against us in the belief that our hands are full but we mean to dispel that delusion and in order to prevent another attack on Greytown or Ruatan ... a 90 gun screw sails shortly to reinforce the West Indian station, another powerful frigate will follow in a fortnight and if necessary some of the Baltic screws when the winter sets in... these bullies

Godley to Adderley, 25 August 1854, in *Extracts from Letters of J.R Godley to C.B. Adderley*, (Ulan Press, 2012) pp. 214-16.

must be shown that we are not afraid of them or they will be hustled into war with us by some of the mob to whose passions they pander.⁷⁶

Tension with the United States also owed to American resentment at the damage done to neutral trade by the Russian war and particularly the British blockade, leading to rumours that the US would turn to privateers. This only made Palmerston more belligerent; however and the reasons for his forcefulness were extremely significant. Firstly, like Clarendon, while at war with Russia Britain was allied with France; secondly, the Canadian legislature had passed some measure towards taking responsibility for defence; and thirdly, confidence remained high in the Royal Navy. Palmerston wrote to Clarendon that “when we have taken Sevastopol ... as we shall do with the Lancaster Guns our naval force will be to a great degree let free. We have France so bound up with us, we have our N. American provinces now united and loyal.” Sea power remained Britain’s trump card, and the Home Secretary therefore suggested to the cabinet that if the United States elected to issue letters of marque Britain should unleash its power and reduce the American eastern seaboard. Palmerston wrote “the U.S. have no navy of which we need be afraid, & they might be told that if they were to resort to privateering, we should ... retaliate by burning all their sea coast Towns.”⁷⁷

Despite Palmerston and Clarendon’s hawkishness, the mounting opposition to military adventure, particularly from Gladstone, Roebuck and Derby, put paid to any use of force against the US. It had been made clear that the British public and parliament would not countenance war over the foreign enlistment crisis, let alone American filibustering in Central America. From 1854 to 1857 successive British Governments faced severe criticism as a result of deficiencies shown first in the Crimea, then on in the Indian Mutiny. *The Times*

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Clarendon to Cowley, private, 22 September 1854, Cowley Papers, FO 519/170.

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Memorandum on a Draft of Despatch from Lord Clarendon to Mr Crampton in Washington, 10 September 1854, in Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America*, p. 183.

especially placed a microscope on the mishandling of the Russian War.⁷⁸ This was highly influential as a result of both wider literacy and the revolution in printing and distribution technology, which by the mid-nineteenth century allowed newspapers to engage society to a greater extent than ever before. William Howard Russell, who would go on to send influential reports back from the Civil War, helped pioneer front-line war reporting and the Crimean War was also among the first conflicts to be captured by photograph. Casualties were extremely high and as in the Civil War the majority succumbed to disease.

The assault on Sebastopol, the rapid reduction of which Palmerston had considered would free the Royal Navy for possible enterprises in the west, turned into a frustrating and protracted siege and the Allies' troubles turned a large section of public opinion against the government, and against military operations in general. There was strong criticism about cutbacks which were held to have deprived the army of vital men and equipment. The backlash against the Peelite government led to the Whigs taking office and Palmerston succeeding Aberdeen as Prime Minister. The faith in the Royal Navy, the growing sectional problems in the US, and the belief that Crampton's treatment was a stunt for domestic political gain, had meant that, on balance, British assurance over provincial security remained intact; however with the military problems experienced in Russia and then in the Indian subcontinent, the imperial troop reduction in North America, and then crucially the regression of the Canadian efforts on defence this began to change.

The northwest and colonial militias

The pressure on Britain's armed forces in the late 1850s increased the importance placed on the colonies taking on greater responsibility for local security – a goal that self-government, unification, and ultimately independence were all intended to work towards.

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Donaldson Jordan & Edwin J. Pratt, *Europe and the American Civil War*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 4.

Following the financial disadvantage brought on by repeal of the Corn Laws Canada's local legislature had argued that it was unjust for the province to be asked to finance defence, however the new economic arrangement under reciprocity impacted British views of the extent to which the colonies should contribute. Describing this, Grey wrote to Elgin;

Canada now has self-government; which ought to carry with it corresponding responsibilities; Her rapid progress in wealth and population makes it only due to the people of (Britain) that they should be relieved from the charge imposed on them for the protection of a colony so well able to do much towards protecting itself. In this I am only reverting to the former colonial policy of this country ... Her Majesty's Government would have thought it right at an earlier period to revert to this policy in Canada but for commercial difficulties thrown in her way by British legislation. That has passed away.⁷⁹

Despite this wish however, in Canada the Militia Act of 1855 soon became moribund and the local forces in the provinces generally were in a poor state. In Canada the geography and economy of British North America made the militia legislation difficult to maintain. For communities reliant on an agrarian economy the months selected for training clashed with the hunting, fishing and tree-felling seasons from which men could ill be spared, and as a result absenteeism was endemic. Those volunteers that did participate usually had to make vast journeys even to reach training grounds and hence were in little physical shape for drilling. The exercises themselves were lacklustre and there were often no uniforms and insufficient arms for companies to drill, in some cases none. The Lieutenant Governor in Nova Scotia the Earl of Mulgrave had similar problems with the lack of professionalism in his local militia, as well as the advanced age of its commanders. Mulgrave wrote to the Colonial Minister that "there is no ground work to start with and officers are generally speaking totally ignorant of their duties and most of them are unfit for the service in consequence of their

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age.”⁸⁰ On paper the New Brunswick Lieutenant Governor Arthur Gordon could call out 48 regiments of New Brunswick militia amounting to just over 40,000 men, however there were only 200 rifles available to equip them. The little artillery possessed by the Nova Scotia militia was obsolescent smooth-bore, low-calibre models. Due to the imperative to scale down the British commitment the protection afforded by imperial troops was steadily decreasing.

The colonial forces were also becoming a more pressing issue in the late 1850's as concerns were growing over the less developed parts of British North America. British Columbia's gold rush and the influx of American immigration revived the fear of US annexation in the North West. Sir Edward Bulmer Lytton became Colonial Secretary in the Lord Derby's administration of 1858-59, and immediately displayed a more bullish attitude towards the necessity of securing the future of Britain's North American possessions. Lytton hoped that permanent settlement in British Columbia would be a catalyst for a continent-wide line of imperial provinces joined by a Pacific railway and telegraph. There was discussion in parliament of the establishment of a new colony in the centre of British North America which could form a 'counterforce' to the United States and connect the easternmost provinces to the Pacific. This further encouraged a political reorganisation of British North America as did security problems with the territory of the Hudson Bay Company. Skirmishes with indigenous peoples had led the Company proprietor to request British military forces to guard the Red River frontier. Wellington in his final political role had argued against the deployment of troops to this post which could only be relieved during a small window each year and via a precarious route, stating that it offered an enemy an "easy prestige victory" by attacking them, however in 1857 the War Office had despatched a hundred men from the Royal Canadian Rifles to protect against a threat from the Metis tribe.⁸¹

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Mulgrave to Labouchere, 3 May 1858, CO 880/2, No. VXXA.

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The Hudson Bay Company's contract was nearing expiry and a Parliamentary Select Committee formed to determine the future of its land. As Britain's willingness to bear responsibility for the security of this vast tract of land was declining, the committee's report decreed that the company's rule should cease and that settlement and union to Canada presented a more suitable option. The results were also instructive as the British reluctance to supply troops together with the annexationist threat led the Canadian Governor General Sir Edmund Head to again mute unification with the other North American colonies as a preventative measure. Head acknowledged the region's remoteness, and was therefore working with the Colonial Minister's railway scheme and telegraph in mind, writing to Lytton: "it is evident that from the distance and natural impediments, the real and active management of local affairs at the Red River or on the Saskatchewan, must be exercised on the spot; but the notion of union, and of interests common with Canada and the North American colonies would have a strong tendency to prevent any leaning towards the United States, and would ensure Her Majesty's Government the support of these colonies against any effort in this direction."⁸² In the previous years to the 1860's, as after, the consistent approach of British colonial policy had been 'divide and rule'. New South Wales had been divided into two colonies, and the struggles in New Zealand had led to the establishment of two semi autonomous provinces. British Columbia had been set up as a colony distinct from Vancouver Island. Confederation was therefore a marked departure for British policy, itself an indicator of the unique determination to create a bulwark against the United States. Rather than a doctrine of 'divide and rule' in British North America the policy came to be 'unite and empower' as increased national power would it was hoped increase the responsibility for defence. This was all the more prevalent at a time when the home government faced pressure to limit the expenditure on imperial defence, this becoming the quintessential goal of Gladstone in his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer that he would

Morton, *The Critical Years*, p. 30.

hold through the era of the Civil War. Even in his tenure as Colonial Secretary in the mid 1840s Gladstone had pressed for awarding self-government to New Zealand at the earliest possible date.⁸³

Given that security in the empire rested primarily on the strength of Britain's sea power there was great reticence to maintain ground forces in the colonies at British taxpayers' expense, particularly due the perception they were largely fulfilling token stewarding roles that should be carried out by local forces. Gladstone wrote that there was something unsatisfactory about "standing armies in the colonies for purposes partly of dignity and display, partly of police, partly of enriching the local community by the expenditure of the Imperial Funds."⁸⁴ Due to the basic local advantages of the US – which would become an increasingly important factor through the 1860s - British North American defence relied on the Royal Navy's ability to exert pressure on American decision-makers by blockade, commerce raiding, naval bombardment or perhaps even coastal assault. Gladstone as a result was pushing towards a minimum of imperial soldiery in the provinces and in the main British naval protection which is "not liable to be employed at the will of the colonial administrators for the repression of disturbances which their own misgovernment may have provoked, nor for anything approaching to the general purpose of police."⁸⁵

Security in Europe and North America

The need to impart more responsibility onto the provinces was made more significant by the breakdown of the British-French alliance after the Crimean War. The seemingly

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H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone: 1809 – 1974*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 188.

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Paul Knaplund, *Gladstone and Britain's Imperial Policy*, (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966), p. 85.

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Ibid p. 86.

boundless ambition of Napoleon III - expanding the French Navy and warring in Italy - made addressing the power of Britain's continental rival the immediate priority. The drive to reduce Britain's imperial commitments therefore owed much to an increasing foreboding about demands being placed on military resources in the dependencies when more urgently required to ward off threats in the most critical theatre to Britain's survival, Europe. Attention was diverted to the invasion threat and developing arms race with France. Fear of the 'bolt from the blue', a rapid thrust across the Channel by an attacking French fleet, encouraged means to relieve British forces from defence duties across the Empire.⁸⁶ The great fear was that the Royal Navy would be diverted away to suppress another uprising in India or perhaps the West Indies, or defend a base in the Mediterranean or protect commerce in the Pacific. The recent experience of the sepoy rebellion provided a warning of the strain Britain could suffer from security in distant possessions. If British sea power was pinned down elsewhere, a powerful French squadron might feel emboldened to make a quick thrust through the English Channel. Making colonies offer more towards their defence was one such way of keeping more of the fleet safely in home waters. To this end the establishment of a permanent 'Channel Squadron' in 1858 also at least freed up an offensive British fleet to attack the vital ports of France or whatever opponent they faced.

Palmerston entered the role he would hold throughout the Civil War at the head of government when Derby's administration fell in 1859 and during a defence debate made explicit that the threat was across the channel. Describing it in his parliamentary diary Trelawney called it "remarkable that Palmerston threw off all diplomatic reserve & plainly indicated where danger lies – viz, in France."⁸⁷ The Prime Minister sought to fortify Dover and Portland, and establish a second inland arsenal to ease the burden on Woolwich. These works were designed not so much to deter a French invasion of southern England but, like

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O' Connor, *Imperial Defence and the Commitment to Empire*, p. 58.

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The Parliamentary Diaries of Sir John Trelawny, 1858-1865, T.A. Jenkins ed., (London: Royal Historical Society, 1990), p. 141.

the imperative to make the provinces do more towards colonial defence, a means of relieving the Royal Navy from having to bear the brunt of meeting such threats in the English Channel. They therefore essentially represented the same strategic necessity, a realisation in Britain of the danger of an overextension of the Royal Navy. On their presentation however some of the problems that would plague the configuration of effective imperial defence during the Civil War came to the fore. It was suggested that the erection of fortifications by a nation that had ostensibly based its security on diplomacy and naval deterrence was apt to arouse suspicion in, if not seriously provoke, potential enemies into greater hostility. Furthermore the advances in particularly rifled gunnery produced doubt that the works could represent a long-term benefit. Combined too with the imperative to reduce military expenditure the measures met with stiff opposition in parliament.

When the Prime Minister was accused in the House of Lords that his measures and language would only alienate the French he displayed the belief he would cling to throughout the Civil War: that the surest form of security lay in diplomatic and military resolve. The Prime Minister argued that “the only foundation for friendship between equals is perfect frankness; and, so far from the fair statement of what we intend to do for our own defence being the ground for bad relations between us and France, I say that not only the statement made to night, but the works which are to follow that statement, are the only foundation for real and substantial friendship with France.” Palmerston however was unable to get all the funding required for the defences, partly due to the fact that technological advances were becoming so swift that by the time of completion the forts would likely become practically obsolete. Trelawny asked “and, when the work shall be completed – if ever – will not new discoveries in artillery require fresh outlay?”⁸⁸

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Gladstone conversely was driven to reduce Britain's imperial and defence budget and therefore sought to consolidate security through diplomacy rather than the increasingly expensive method of military deterrence. The Chancellor was consequently looking for other forms of accord with France and dispatched Cobden to Paris to negotiate the Free Trade agreement deeming it crucial to forge some economic amity between the nations. Gladstone briefed Cobden over the mission, describing "...the great aim - the moral and political significance of the act, and its probable and desired fruit in binding the two countries together by interest and affection. Neither you nor I attach for the moment any superlative value to this Treaty for the sake of the extension of British trade ... What I look to is the social good, the benefit to the relations of the two countries, and the effect on the peace of Europe".⁸⁹

The Prince of Wales's North American Tour

The effect of the insecurity over France necessarily played directly on the minds of British diplomats with regard to how they assessed the imperial position in North America. Towards the very end of the antebellum decade a local dispute in the Vancouver Island territory concerning farming land when a British citizen's pig was killed by an American neighbour caused a diplomatic controversy over the position of the Oregon-Columbia District boundary. Reporting his efforts to reach compromise back to Russell, Foreign Minister in Palmerston's administration, the new British Minister in Washington Lord Lyons referred to the problem of American use of anti-British feeling for political capital writing "I have said all I have been able to think of to enforce the fairness and good sense of our proposal, but electioneering considerations outweigh all other in this country, elections go on without a pause from years end to years end, and violent language against England is always popular

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with the rabble who alone take part in them.”⁹⁰ This issue would shortly assume greater significance with the election that sparked the secession crisis. During the 1860 presidential campaign which brought Lincoln to power, Lyons wrote to Russell that “whichever party is in power in this country, we must, I am afraid, be always prepared for a declaration of war by the United States, if we are involved in serious difficulties in Europe.”⁹¹

Diplomacy did smooth over the crisis, important as it signalled a moment when, despite the insecurity with France, most British-American issues had been resolved. Incumbent president James Buchanan, effectively left helpless by the deteriorating relations between North and South, was hoping his presidential legacy would at least benefit from having settled the contentious matters in foreign relations, particularly with Britain. Recounting his last meeting with the Buchanan, Lyons wrote “he began by repeating an observation he often makes to me, that it has been his great ambition to be able to say at the end of his Administration that he left no question with Great Britain unsettled: that for the first time since the Revolution ‘the docket was clear.’”⁹² The reception given to the Prince of Wales during his North American tour the following year was seen as evidence of this rapprochement. Amongst other symbolic acts Prince Edward shook hands with the last American survivor of the Battle of Bunker Hill.⁹³ One of the most notable impressions was that formed by the new British Colonial Minister the Duke of Newcastle who accompanied the Prince. Of the ovation from the American people Newcastle wrote: “there could be but two causes for such a demonstration: personal love of the Queen, which amongst this people is a passion, and rapidly growing affection for England, which I am thoroughly

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Lyons to Russell, 17 October 1859, PRO 30/22/96.

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Lyons to Russell, 8 May 1860, Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/96.

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Lyons to Russell, 17 October 1859, Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/96.

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Winks, *The Civil War Years*, p. 7.

convinced this visit will speedily ripen into a firm and (if properly watched and fostered) an enduring attachment ... I think I am not too sanguine in saying now that we shall leave the United States on the 20th a faster friend to our country than they have been since their separation.”⁹⁴

On the eve of the Civil War therefore the imperial government had resumed its sense of ease over North American security, an assurance that had, in general, been maintained since the War of 1812. This was not only due to the improvement in Anglo-American relations, but also because of a corresponding good feeling from the provinces towards the mother country. The visit of the Prince of Wales, as well as the recent French war scare, had ignited a patriotism which encouraged the formation of new volunteer militia companies making the home government more optimistic about local defence. The Colonial Minister suggested to Palmerston that at the start of the next session of parliament they should seize the opportunity to consolidate this good feeling in British North America so as to propagate the improvement of provincial forces. Newcastle wrote to the Prime Minister that “the Colonies have rarely been mentioned in a Queen’s Speech, unless when they have incurred a censure for some rebellious indication ... You will probably allude in the speech to our defences and the raising of volunteers. If so, this would give you an opportunity of saying that the same spirit has been evinced by all the Colonies, and that the Queen is deeply gratified by the proofs of loyalty which they have evinced.”⁹⁵ This indication of colonial action on defence was a fundamental part of the British policy on self-government and in order to enhance this relationship the plan remained in place for eventual consolidation of the provinces into one state, following the carrying out of preliminary Atlantic union and construction of the intercolonial railroad. This was made clear by the Colonial Minister after

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John Martineau, *The Life of Henry Pelham, Fifth Duke of Newcastle, 1811 – 1864*, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1908), p. 300.

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Ibid, p. 288.

the North American tour. Newcastle wrote that union was “the object to be aimed at (though) other minor measures must precede it”.

Summary

The metropolitan goal of seeing British North America become united had emerged and persisted in the antebellum era, chiefly as a means to enhance imperial security. There were two main strands to this: one, to keep the provinces from falling to the United States; two, to enlarge the responsibility of the colonial governance with a view to relieving the mother country of some of the burden for defence. The determination to maintain British North America outside of the United States owed much to the imperial prejudice against US republicanism, which imperial statesmen believed to be a threat not only to English democracy, but, somewhat hyperbolically, to world peace. The possibility of the provinces being subsumed by the union had been a prevalent issue at various times through the century. The fear of annexation had arisen at the time of the Canadian Rebellions and linked to a general concern of the United States adopting a malevolent interpretation of Manifest Destiny or the Monroe Doctrine, or even simply a natural drift in the American orbit via increasing economic and commercial ties. In the mid-to late 1850's this economic prospect attracted more attention from imperial thinkers than a direct military threat, even despite American victory over Mexico. As with the union and increased autonomy put in place for Upper and Lower Canada at the end of the 1830s which was implemented partly to increase its sense of 'national' status in 1838 and affiliation with the empire, general confederation of British North America came to be favoured to replicate this model on a larger scale. Unification was favoured as it was posited that belonging to a 'greater' country would be a disincentive to the colonial peoples to join the United States.

Furthermore, as Britain wished to maintain its empire in North America in order to 'counterbalance' the insidious influence of the US, it was hoped that, over time, this united

entity would grow to sufficient strength to even challenge Federal hegemony on the continent. The nature of self government and the undesirability of once again alienating the colonial people however meant that the provinces themselves had to be equal and willing participants in the process. This long-term aim was considered feasible as imperial statesmen refuted that the US could storm British North America by force, a conviction that was held right up until the Civil War. For this reason Ephraim Douglass Adams and Kenneth Bourne were wrong to conclude that Britain had given up on opposing republican dominance in the region prior to the Civil War. Of the US gains after the Mexican War for example Kenneth Bourne wrote that "This new round of American expansionism the British viewed with unabated alarm."⁹⁶ This chapter had argued that Bourne overstated the extent of British concern over Federal growth prior to 1861. Indeed, it was the very assurance the imperial government felt about the military balance that allowed them to favour a long term project like Confederation.

The only (though important) real dangers to this appraisal appeared to be factors external to North America, though ironically they were partly alleviated by factors internal. Firstly the economic danger of the provinces themselves turning to the United States was increased by the home policy of repealing the Corn Laws. Secondly the fear that Britain would become embroiled in Europe, or with a European power, always carried with it the suspicion that the United States would exploit the distraction to make a land-grab on the provinces and in the mid-1850s Britain fought the Crimean War. Signing the Reciprocity Treaty helped assuage the first danger, while both were mitigated by the internal tensions in the United States in that southern resistance to free-state expansionism served to help keep northern economic and military 'imperialism' in check.

The antebellum decade however did serve notice of the aims of provincial unification to a degree. The reformist policy of reducing colonial military commitments, driven partly by

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pressure from radicals and Gladstone's push for economy – and intensified by the demands made on imperial forces by the war with Russia – led to greater calls for the provinces to take up some of the burden for defence themselves. As the concept of union was to imbue provincial sentiment with an enhanced sense of nationhood, so too this increased pride and responsibility became linked to the colonies taking on a greater share of the burden of orchestrating local defence. Francis Hincks, a Canadian politician who helped to negotiate the Reciprocity Treaty appreciated exactly in 1853 that this imperial rationale behind unification was to “devise some plan by which the burden of defence may be thrown upon the Colonies, and they imagine that this can only be effected by a large combination.”

By the outbreak of the Civil War however these aims had not assumed paramount urgency. British statesmen still felt relatively assured by the power balance in North America and therefore the long term projects felt necessary to accomplish continental union; primarily an intercolonial railway and Maritime Union to forge better economic and cultural bonds between the provinces, were considered attainable over time. Watkin unwittingly summarised this and the American allure to be overridden when he described the Dominion of Canada in his later biography. Of confederation Watkin wrote “certainly, in 1861, this great idea seemed like a mere dream of an uncertain future. Blocked by wide stretches of half-explored country: dependent upon approaches through United States’ territory: each Province enforcing its separate, and differing, tariffs, the one against the others ... it was not a matter of surprise to find a growing gravitation towards the United States, based, alike, on augmenting trade and augmenting prejudices.”⁹⁷ It was the onset of the secession crisis in 1860-61 that started to elicit a diplomatic and strategic environment in which the steady and methodical completion of these pre—requisite measures appeared to be compromised.

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CHAPTER 3

THE SECESSION CRISIS, 1860-61

The same Republican election victory that caused seven States to secede in the autumn/winter of 1860-1861 also to a large degree initiated the British sense of crisis over imperial defence throughout the Civil War. Like those disaffected in the South, original misgivings in Britain stemmed from the character of the next Federal Government under the likely stewardship of Republican politician William H. Seward. Seward lost out as Republican nominee mainly as he would carry greater baggage than the lesser known Lincoln into the sectionalist presidential contest. Following the Republican victory however Seward was entrusted with what was considered the next most prestigious position in the Federal cabinet, Secretary of State, and moreover the role that would bring him into most contact and possible friction with Britain. British worries were exacerbated by the assumption - also prevalent in America - that the inexperienced Lincoln would be little more than a figurehead leader, leaving the more famous name in the party, Seward, effectively commanding both major roles. Seward himself believed the true power would be in his hands, going so far as to compare his position and President Abraham Lincoln's to that of a Prime Minister and monarchical head of state respectively. He told the Russian minister in Washington Eduard de Stoeckl that a monarch, like the President, was in place through an "accident of circumstances, hereditary in this case, and in truth the actual direction of public affairs belongs to the leader of the ruling party, here as in any hereditary principality."⁹⁸ The expectation of Seward's pre-eminence was most alarming as the concern centred on one of the empire's most vulnerable territories, British North America, fear being sustained by the knowledge that expansion to the north had long formed part of Seward's political agenda. In campaigning for nomination as the party's presidential candidate two years before, Seward had included in his manifesto annexation of the British Northwest, stating that Rupert's Land would make a "great" state for the Union.⁹⁹ While exploitation of Anglophobic sentiment and

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Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2013), Vol. 2, p. 98.

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Seward Campaign Speech, *Daily Times* (St Paul), 22 September 1860.

pledging the cession of British North America were customary electioneering tactics however, British concern over Seward's policies owed as much to private pronouncements as to public.

Britain's Colonial Secretary having accompanied the Prince on his recent American tour, Newcastle's dealings with Seward on the trip left him with an impression that the New Yorker may catastrophically misjudge Britain's patience, particularly regarding agitation towards the North American provinces. Indeed, the nickname acquired in the South 'irrepressible conflict Seward' (for inflammatory comments deemed to prophesy war between slavery and anti-slavery America) could also have been applicable to a perception that grew in England. At one reception Newcastle had been told by Seward that he would "make use of insults to England to secure his own position in the States" and "was confident (England) should never go to war with the States – (she) dared not and could not afford it." Demonising the old enemy Great Britain would prove to be a concerted policy of Seward's to build public support in the US and was for the most part recognised by the Palmerston's cabinet as the bluster it was. However the Colonial Secretary's response revealed the importance placed by imperial government in maintaining its sense of pride and status amongst the nations of the earth. Newcastle wrote "I told him there was no fear of war except from a policy as he indicated, and that if he carried it out and touched our honour, he would ... find he had embroiled his country in a disastrous conflict at the moment when he fancied he was bullying all before him."¹⁰⁰

Even though the Secretary of State's words and actions might only be designed for home consumption, from early on paranoia existed in the imperial cabinet that Seward would underestimate Britain's willingness to stand up for its honour and the countries would spiral into hostilities. When on one occasion Seward specifically claimed that Britain would not go to war over Canada the Colonial Secretary's response was no less than a direct reference to naval bombardment of the eastern United States. Newcastle told the Secretary of State "Do not remain under such an error. There is no people under Heaven from whom we should endure so much as from yours; to whom we should make such concessions ... but once touch us in our honour and you will soon find the bricks of New York and Boston falling about your heads." The Colonial Minister's comments indicated the salience of honour in British dealings as well as the continued feeling of security surrounding the use of naval power.

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After the conversations with Seward Newcastle told Watkin that "I do not think they believe we should ever fight them; but we certainly should if the provocation were strong."¹⁰¹

From March 1861, even before the outbreak of actual hostilities between the states, serious fears arose of a British - American war. The first source of apprehension was the 'foreign war panacea', a rumoured policy of Seward's for staving off disunion by engaging in a general American war against a third party. The Secretary of State's initial pretext for this was retaliation against British opposition to the new Federal tariff, enacted in the final days of the previous administration. As alluded to in the previous chapter, the agrarian economy of the South together with its rising antagonism towards the 'materialistic' and commercial character of the North, had previously secured enough opposition to prevent protectionist legislation passing through Congress. The secession crisis changed this, the exit of Southern senators from Washington enabling the passage of the Morrill Tariff on March 2, immediately altering economic relations between Britain and the North. The Republican administration took office on March 4 and from Lyons's first meeting with Seward the British minister exhibited concern that any issue could be conflated to a *cassus-belli*, the new import duties providing the first flashpoint. Lyons was told that if Europe protested the new tariff nothing would give Seward more pleasure for in a quarrel "South Carolina and the seceding States would soon join in." The British Minister also received a report from Stoeckl that Seward had outlined a scheme resembling the foreign war panacea. The Secretary of State had said that, "If the Lord would only give the United States an excuse for a war with England, France or Spain ... that would be the best means for establishing internal peace."¹⁰² This new imperial security concern, fuelled by the economic effects of the secession crisis, appeared to be given substance by Seward's reputation for preaching Federal expansionism and his earlier comments to the Duke of Newcastle.

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Watkin, *Canada and the States*, p. 16.

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Quoted in Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, p.89.

Imperial political, economic, cultural and strategic benefits from separation

The North's new economic policy was therefore among the first of many instances in which the political fall-out of Southern secession hampered British-American relations and this inevitably helped engender sympathy and support in England for the rebellion. The Confederate Constitution came into being on March 11, and while mostly identical to that of the United States, the new document expressly prohibited the southern congress from enacting any protective duties or tariffs. *The Times* printed that "so long as the Washington Congress adheres and even adds new restrictions to a protective policy they give their enemies the best excuse for hostility, and cut themselves off from the sympathy of their friends."¹⁰³ *The Times* was not only often a signifier of government opinion, but with its high level of readership the text most consumed in the United States in order to gauge popular British feeling. From this an ongoing dialogue of recriminations between the principal Northern and British newspapers began, lasting throughout the Civil War and helping create a general climate of insecurity over Anglo-American relations during it. Charles Dickens, who had acquainted himself strongly with the American people and institutions for his travel writings on the United States declared that "*The Times*, by playing fast and loose with the American question, has very seriously compromised this country."¹⁰⁴ Federal protectionism remained a major issue throughout the Civil War, particularly when it eventually came to terminate the Reciprocity Treaty in 1864.

Even in general however, diplomacy with the United States was difficult from the outset due to London's lack of support for the Federal cause. Britain took great pride in the work it had done to arrest the African slave trade and its great hope was for bondage to

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The Times, 8 March 1861.

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Martin Crawford, *The Anglo-American Crisis of the Mid-Nineteenth Century, 1850-1862: The Times and America*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 112.

cease in the United States. Lincoln's deliberate denial that the war had anything to do with slavery, while effective in keeping the border states out of the Confederacy, meant that he relinquished a potential source of sympathy from abroad. This made life more difficult for those who did wish to advance the cause of the Union. Another contemporary luminary for example, Charles Darwin, wrote "some few, and I am one of them, even wish to God, that the North would proclaim a crusade against slavery."¹⁰⁵ Except for the famous pro-Union sympathies of John Bright, Richard Cobden and William Forster – whose sentiments are so well known partly *because* they went against the tide – Federal support was practically absent from parliament and certainly from Palmerston's cabinet, increasing the sense of bitterness towards England amongst many Northerners. With the slavery question therefore not affording the Union moral high-ground in England, British statesmen reverted to their natural political sympathies and ideals. The British ruling classes were inclined to favour the more aristocratic and free-trade leaning South over what they considered the mob-ridden, protective, and territorially aggrandising North.

Quiet trumpeting in Britain for the Confederacy however also had much to do with the security of British North America. The problems that the imperial government had encountered in terms of bringing the provinces to organize local defence, together with the fiscal threat of the provinces becoming subservient to the US, meant that great advantages were perceived in Confederate independence. Lord Robert Cecil alluded to the economic threat of the new Federal policy, as well as the more weighty danger of the US becoming an ocean power, when he came to advance the case for recognising the South. Cecil argued that "the Northern States of America never could be our sure friends ... not merely because the newspapers wrote at each other, or that there were prejudices on both sides, but because we were rivals, rivals politically and rivals commercially. We aspired to the same position. We both aspired to the government of the seas." Separation would mean the

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dismemberment of a trade rival while strategically it would potentially give Britain a valuable ally in a conflict over Canada forcing the US to divert resources to its southern flank.

Politically too, the British wish to limit Federal republicanism due to the pent up prejudices that had festered through the antebellum period induced the imperial government to favour separation. Russell characterised the conflict as a liberation movement resisting a government fighting for “empire.” *The Times* made a similar argument, commenting that “the real motives of the belligerents, as the truth transpires; appear to be exactly such motives as have caused wars in all times and countries. They are essentially selfish motives – that is to say, they are based upon speculations of national power, territorial aggrandizement, political advantage, and commercial gain.”¹⁰⁶ Parallels were frequently drawn that if the rebels of 1776 were justified in declaring independence then so too were those of 1860. Moreover both historical precedent and recently established policy favoured the recognition of breakaway governments and nationalist movements. Consequently the breach between Washington and London widened due to irreconcilable opinions about southern secession. While the Republican Administration wished to preserve the Federal Union – considering this essential to the future of freedom and democratic ideals - and believed it could do so by force, the British government in general held the opposite views. The English ruling classes did not see restoration of the Union as desirable, nor did they hold that such an end could be achieved by war. The British Government believed southerners to be in earnest and therefore dismissed the possibility of putting down a rebellion on the scale of 8,000,000 people across 300,000 square miles of territory. The North on the other hand denied that this necessity existed, claiming that a coterie of extremists had seized control in the South and that with a small number of victories the latent unionist sentiment there would reassert itself. Conviction in the Foreign Office in part resulted from the despatches of their consuls in Southern towns who conveyed the determination that prevailed there. Russell wrote “I do not now see how the United States can be cobbled together again by any compromise. ... I

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cannot see any mode for reconciling such parties as these. The best thing now would be that the right to secede should be acknowledged.”¹⁰⁷

Lincoln’s tactic moreover of waiting for the Confederacy to act as aggressors before mobilising Federal power was seen as military and political suicide. Despite Seward’s wish to give the South the concession of evacuating Fort Sumter (the surrender of which had been demanded by Confederacy) the President exercised his own authority and allowed the ultimatum to expire. Following the eventual firing on the fort *The Times* printed “To allow full scope to a revolution until it is fully organised, and then to oppose it, seems to be nothing short of madness”. This damning verdict of the North’s chances was prefixed with the opinion “Surely the time for coercion is past and *the only* course now open to the Government of Washington is to accept secession as a fait accompli.”¹⁰⁸ English sympathy for the Confederacy therefore was predicated not only on the political, economic, cultural and strategic self-interest associated with southern independence but also on the simple pragmatism that independence could not be prevented by the North. This meant that British policy would ultimately be directed to recognition of the South.

The pressure to reduce colonial military expenditure

The diplomatic friction that had begun to develop with the Union over these differing impressions of Southern secession occurred against a significant context of increasing pressure on the imperial government to reduce military expenditure. Just as the new Republican administration was taking office in March 1861 the House of Commons was mounting a fierce assault on the expense accrued in protecting colonial possessions. As described in the previous chapter, despite the growing conviction that self-governing colonies should materially contribute to providing for their military security, the local militias

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Russell to Lyons, 22 January 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

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The Times, 18 April 1861.

in British North America were in a state of degeneration. This led to Parliament appointing a Select Committee to report on how a portion of the burden of imperial security might be transferred to the colonies themselves. The Parliamentary Select Committee's official remit was "to inquire and report whether any and what alterations may be advantageously adopted in regard to the Defence of the British Dependencies, and the proportions of cost of such Defence as now defrayed from Imperial and Colonial funds respectively." The motion for its creation was moved by a Conservative, Arthur Mills, whose voice held considerable gravitas as it was he who had written and published what was considered the definitive treatise of the maladministration that had led to, and the costs that had resulted from, the Indian Mutiny. Mills described the current imperial drain for Britain as "a burden ... involving an expenditure of £4,000,000 sterling – and the withdrawal of 100,000 soldiers from the service of the mother country to the outlying provinces of our empire."¹⁰⁹

As part of its inquiries the Select Committee questioned the Colonial Minister and honed in on the security of British North America. Newcastle was asked whether "a federal union of the North American Provinces would tend to facilitate the arrangements for the more efficient and economical defence of those provinces."¹¹⁰ The Colonial Minister, who was also influenced by the belligerent warnings given by Seward, surveying the tense climate wrote on March 1 that union "is what must eventually be bought about and may be hastened by events arising out of the condition of the rest of the Continent."¹¹¹ As argued, the Colonial Office had considered eventual union the logical outcome of both the construction of a trans-continental railroad and the smaller union of the Maritime Provinces, to then merge with Upper and Lower Canada. The Colonial Secretary's principal reservation was that it preferred legislative union to federal - the secession crisis now presenting an

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Hansard, CLXXXV, 24 March 1861, cols. 333-335.

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British Parliamentary Papers, 1861, *Colonial Military Expenditure*, Q. 2968.

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Minute by Newcastle, 13 March 1861, CO 42/626, FOS 22-4.

ominous example of the fragility of a federal system - particularly when its primary rationale was in centralising the responsibility for its security. Newcastle therefore was reluctant to advocate a “federal” structure; however due to the scheme’s synonymy with the building of the continental railway the Colonial Minister endorsed the merger in general. Newcastle told the commissioners that “any plan which threw the Government of all these countries into a united power would facilitate arrangements for the construction of railways.” The secession crisis had rapidly impressed the security issue on the mind of Colonial Secretary and an early consolidation of the colonies into a vast single federation it was hoped might accelerate the railway scheme, felt as it was imperative for defence. This was revealing because it indicated that having previously held the conviction that a sequence must be followed of construction of a railroad, then maritime unification, and later a merger of that federation to the Canadas, Newcastle contemplated a departure from their expected timetable because of the political upheaval in the United States. That the Colonial Minister was influenced by the tactical value of the railway was verified by Watkin who relayed that the Newcastle had stated “this work was not a mere local work, but satisfied military and other Imperial conditions.”¹¹² The Colonial Minister furthermore apparently believed that creating the railway would as good as make confederation a guarantee. According to Watkin in 1861 he and the Newcastle both felt that “the union of all the provinces and territories into ‘one great British America’ was ‘the necessary, the logical result’ of completing the Intercolonial Railway.”¹¹³

The recourse to unification also continued to link to the doctrine that greater self-government went hand in hand with responsibility for defence. Costly work was still incomplete after many years on fortifications in British North America. The drive for economy was now making military thinking veer away from works which, by requiring continual maintenance and manning by soldiers, only appeared to accentuate the burden - especially

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Watkin, *Canada and the States*, p. 81.

¹¹³

Ibid., p. 65B.

when the progression of weapons technology threatened rapidly to make them obsolete. This problem of the draining of imperial troops intensified the home government's preference for relying on the Royal Navy. As a result the Parliamentary Select Committee reported "that the multiplication of fortified places, and the erection of fortifications in distant colonial possessions ... on a scale requiring for their defence a far greater number of men than could be spared for them in the event of war, involve a useless expenditure, and fail to provide an efficient protection for places the defence of which mainly depends on superiority at sea."¹¹⁴ Cost-sapping fixed defence schemes within provinces therefore were to be eschewed in favour of augmenting Britain's naval strength for colonial security. The advent of steam powered warships had revised the strategic picture in increasing Britain's ability to project maritime strength at times of crisis across the empire, but also in making the British Isles more accessible to hostile fleets. England therefore had practically "ceased to be an island". This shifting the emphasis to home defence, the resolution was also unanimously adopted that it was "desirable to concentrate the troops required for the defence of the United Kingdom as much as possible and to trust mainly to naval supremacy for securing against foreign aggression in the distant dependencies of the Empire."¹¹⁵

The growing threat as the Civil War escalates on land and sea

The dearth of local forces in British North America - tolerable during the antebellum period as the imperial cutbacks took place - assumed a more critical aspect when the political crisis in the US subsequently escalated to armed conflict both on land and at sea. On land the danger was a basic, inevitable by-product of British North America's geographic position with a nation arming itself across the frontier. Planned aggression notwithstanding,

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Hansard, CLXXXV, 24 March 1861, cols. 353-357.

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Donald Creighton, *Dominion of the North*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957), p. 290.

the Federal mobilisation carried inherent dangers of border incidents and flashpoints that could escalate to war. Very early on the State Governors of New York and Ohio attempted to procure arms from the Governor General of Canada Sir Edmund Walker Head, a request which was refused. A statute forbade the removal of arms from the provinces and amid deteriorating relations with the Union Britain could not afford the North the double advantage of increasing its military preparedness while simultaneously decreasing its own.¹¹⁶ Head had already written to Lyons of an early instance of Federal deserters being pursued across the frontier into Canada, stating that if such occurrences persisted a military presence would be required in the West of the province. Following the scaling down of imperial troops over the previous decade however, there were now just over 4000 British regulars across all of the North American possessions - barely half the number stationed there at the mid-point of the century. From this very early stage, particularly given the diplomatic differences with the Union and the reduction of forces in the provinces, imperial leaders exhibited paranoia about the new Northern army turning on British North America when the issue with the South was settled. Indeed on April 24, less than two weeks after the bombardment of Sumter and Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers, Head was communicating his fears over their future employment to the British Secretary of War George Cornwall Lewis. The Governor General wrote that "it would be not a pleasant thing to have 100,000 or 200,000 men kicking their heels with arms in their hands on our frontier and all the habits acquired in a southern civil war."¹¹⁷

This prospect that British North America would become a battleground sooner rather than later became more marked when the respective leaders announced their intention to adopt naval war measures, Lincoln to blockade the rebel coast, Confederate leader Jefferson Davis to issue letters of marque and reprisal. The imposition of the Federal

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Head to Newcastle, 13 May 1861, CO 205/230,

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Head to Lewis, 24 April 1861, Harpton Court Collection, HCC 1531: C/1531.

blockade dealt a further blow to British trade following as it did the Northern tariff, and was especially agitating to British statesmen as they mostly did not believe in the cause of the war with the South. The measure interrupted the cotton trade essential to the working populations of predominantly northern England, however Lyons was warned by the Secretary of State at the very start: "if one of your ships comes out of a Southern Port, without the Papers required by the laws of the United States, and is seized by one of our Cruisers and carried into New York and confiscated, we shall not make any compensation." Lyons, fearing the consequences of the loss of British commerce, responded that "the most simple, if not the only way, would be to recognise the Southern Confederacy." This threat to acknowledge Southern independence played directly into the South's 'King Cotton Policy' - a theory that the starvation of the textile mills would compel the European powers to act in their favour - , even more so when Seward responded to the British Minister's comment with his own threat of military retaliation. Indeed, shortly after at a reception given by Lyons, the Secretary of State let vent at this prospect and shouted "such recognition will mean war! The whole world will be engulfed and revolution will be the harvest."¹¹⁸ This warning that recognising the South would bring a military response, relayed to the Foreign Office, was highly influential throughout the Civil War in leading Britain to hold back from recognition, particularly given the shortfall of local forces in the provinces. Leaning toward Southern success therefore, but now wary of provoking the North, Britain resolved to let the conflict run its course. The outgoing American Minister in London George M. Dallas was therefore told by Russell on April 27 that he "refuses to pledge himself."¹¹⁹ Cautious of the danger to British shipping however and still suspicious that Seward would ignite a diplomatic quarrel, that same day the Foreign Minister directed the North American squadron to be reinforced.

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Lyons to Russell, 5 May 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

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Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, p. 91.

In other ways too the imperial government's response to the blockade was influenced by its own strategic interests. Early in the year Russell had had to ward off questions over the abolishment of blockades, and had been sure to state Britain's vital interest in their continuation. Especially considering the vulnerability of Canada where Britain could not match the US on land it was necessary to safeguard the resort to blockade. This would in the event of war represent Britain's main offensive weapon against the US. The Foreign Minister summed up the danger to Britain thus, that "there being two Powers, one of which has a very strong army and a weak navy, the other having an army inferior in numbers, but a superior navy, that the Power which has the superior navy should forego all the advantage to be derived from that source, and allow the contest to be decided by military force alone." This led to the first debate in parliament on the significance of the Civil War. The Declaration of Paris, signed by Britain in 1856, held that blockades 'to be binding must be effective'. It was therefore asked of the cabinet whether they would accept that of the North if it did not meet these criteria. Indeed throughout the war supporters of the Confederacy would petition the government to break the blockade, citing the evidence of blockade runners and weak enforcement. This was a critical issue however as it held direct implications for the continued viability or otherwise of the Royal Navy as the main source of British power. As a policy tolerant of a loose screening place less onus on British blockades to be watertight in the future, Britain had a vested interest in its maintenance. This was important because if for instance Britain did have to go to war with the United States, even the world's largest navy, the British, could not man every single part of the thousands of miles of American coastline. The United States had dissented Britain's blockade when the Royal Navy had been stretched during the war with Russia, and it was pointed out by the cabinet that "many questions of nicety had come ... during the Crimean War; and ... this country, now that it was in the situation of a neutral, would have no reason to insist upon any other rules than those which it had acted upon as a belligerent." Russell argued that "if this proposition were

accepted, the whole of the power would be gone which has hitherto rendered Great Britain so formidable at sea."¹²⁰

The diplomatic damage from the Declaration of Neutrality and Belligerent Rights

Breaking the Federal blockade too would have represented an act of war against the Union, and this also influenced the imperial government's consistent reluctance to do so through the Civil War. Wary of the shortfall in local defence in the provinces and Seward's threats imperial statesmen determined that England should follow a non-interventionist policy. Becoming embroiled in the conflict equally was considered bad policy as British statesmen believed the North would realise separation was inevitable and therefore costly intervention would be unnecessary. Palmerston had written to Russell early in the secession crisis that "nothing could be more inadvisable than for us to interfere in the dispute, if it should break out, between any of the states of the Union, and the federal government."¹²¹ Shortly after Lincoln and Davis's announcements therefore the Foreign Minister issued the Declaration of Neutrality, warning British citizens that they would forgo the right to legal protection if they participated in the conflict. This policy had a direct bearing on avoiding conflict in North America for if British sailors attempted to run the blockade or enlisted as privateers in the Confederate navy, the risk of being tried in Federal courts could force Britain to make official protests and possibly war. Russell said famously in the first House of Lords debate on the Civil War "we have not been involved in any way in that contest by any act or giving any advice in the matter, and, for God's sake, let us if possible keep out of it!"¹²²

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Ibid.

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Palmerston to Russell, 11 December 1860, Broadlands, MS 62.

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The declaration prohibited the enlistment by British subjects in the armed forces of either party, as well as the fitting out of vessels equipped for war by British contractors. When the new US Ambassador Charles Francis Adams eventually arrived in London the Foreign Minister told him the declaration was “to explain to British subjects their liabilities in case they should engage in the war”¹²³ Having informed the Secretary of State that Britain would take no precipitate action, it was construed by Seward as a shift by Russell from refusing to “pledge himself” on a policy as he had stated to Dallas, to now setting out a deliberate ‘neutral’ one.

This definitive statement by the Foreign Minister, influenced by the strategic interests of averting war with the North and enabling the South to prove it could maintain its sovereignty, in fact caused extensive diplomatic damage. This is because Seward accused the Foreign Secretary of duplicity whereas to Russell the neutrality proclamation was consistent with his previous stance by not favouring either side. Russell argued that the declaration “implied no recognition, nor allowed any other than an intermediate position on the part of the Southern States” however to the North ‘neutrality’ was highly offensive in validating the Confederacy’s struggle, especially when this was combined with the awarding of belligerent status shortly after. Intended to help safeguard imperial security therefore, ironically this measure served to further endanger it.

Given that the Northern blockade was a military measure implicitly denoting a state of actual war, British leaders questioned the entitlement of the Federal government to regard Confederate privateers not as combatants but as pirates. Leader of the opposition Lord Derby raised this with the cabinet, stating: “the Northern States, on the one hand, cannot be entitled to claim the rights of belligerents for themselves, and, on the other, to treat the Southern States, not as belligerents, but as rebels.”¹²⁴ Unable to prescribe one military resort

Hansard, CLXXXV, 1 May 1861, col. 33.

¹²³

Russell to Adams, 18 May 1861, PRO 30/22/35

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as lawful and the other unlawful therefore, the imperial government acknowledged the belligerent rights of the South. Again the rationale was largely strategic as unless Davis was entitled to issue letters of marque, any refusal to pursue Southern privateers as criminals could lead to a diplomatic break with the North. As an invocation of the law of nations the declaration of belligerent rights bound the Confederacy to the rules of warfare and safeguarded Britain from the need to take action against Southern privateers. Once more however the strategic benefits of apparently legitimising the Confederate war effort and allowing the South greater military scope to achieve its independence for these very same reasons inflicted corresponding harm on Anglo-American relations. The awarding of belligerent status ultimately proved even more divisive to than the Declaration of Neutrality.

The threat to British neutrality from activity in the provinces

The Declaration of Neutrality was issued to all subjects of the British Crown and therefore equally, if not more, applicable in the provinces where the geographical proximity to the US made involvement more practical and therefore carried greater risk of violation. This was the case over a British steamer on Lake Ontario, the 'Peerless', rumoured to have been purchased by the Confederacy and which Seward brought to imperial attention. The Secretary of State's petition however was made directly to the Canadian Governor General rather than through the proper channel, the British legation in Washington. Head was asked by Seward to "take all possible steps to stop this piratical cruiser at the canals or elsewhere"¹²⁵ while Lyons reminded Seward that communications should be made through him and not directly to Canada. These exchanges further fuelled the imperial cabinet's concern that the Secretary of State would start a war with Britain, either as an intentional

Hansard, CLXXXV, 18 February 1861, cols. 114-135.

¹²⁵

Winks, *The Civil War Years*, p. 45.

'panacea' to the Union's crisis or from mistakenly overestimating how much 'bluster' England would tolerate. The Prime Minister wrote to Russell that "these communications are very unpleasant. It is not at all unlikely that either from foolish and uncalculating arrogance and self-sufficiency or from political calculation Mr. Seward may bring on a quarrel with us."¹²⁶ Lyons too was beginning to concur with Newcastle's analysis and wrote to the Foreign Secretary that Seward was under the false impression "that England will never go to war with the United States" and thus "could be safely played with without any risk."

Through British North America therefore the diplomatic tension, as well as the question of imperial military readiness, came into sharper focus. This concern over the Secretary of State's recklessness reinforced Britain's favoured policy of achieving security through firm diplomacy and deterrence. The intention ran along the same lines adopted by the Colonial Minister when he had warned Seward that any attempts on Canada would be met with a military response: namely to prevent Seward taking such a 'liberty' that honour would leave no alternative but use of force. Russell told Lyons that he must impress upon the US that Britain's "forbearance sprung from a consciousness of strength, and not from the timidity of weakness."¹²⁷ This was also a policy very natural to Palmerston. Therefore when Lyons himself was pressured by Seward to seize the vessel he vehemently responded that if the ship's papers were in order they had possessed no legal right to do so. Seward told the British minister that unless the Canadian authorities acted he himself would order the *Peerless* to be apprehended to which Lyons protested "unequivocally and without reservation."¹²⁸ Head, declaring himself fearful of the repercussions of US seizure or of damage caused to the canals, told the ambassador that he was delighted that such a "clear and emphatic" rebuke had been made to Seward.

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Palmerston to Russell, 2 June 1861, Broadlands, MS 62.

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Russell to Lyons, June 14 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

¹²⁸

Ibid.

An even weightier issue compromising imperial security early in the conflict was the risk to British neutrality caused by covert Federal activities in the provinces. Seward had despatched a political ally in former Congressman George Ashmun to Canada ostensibly to act as a counter agent to subvert pro-Confederate feeling. Ashmun was to meet with the Governor General (with whom he was acquainted) on the pretence of non-political business but was instructed by Seward to “impart ... correct information on the subject ... of the motives and prospects of citizens in some of the Southern States who are avowedly disloyal to the Union.”¹²⁹ Details of this mission were exposed by the *New York Herald* and provoked further consternation in both the Foreign and Colonial Offices. Russell wrote to Lyons to instruct him to “not conceal from Mr Seward the unfavourable impression” produced. The British minister did so and reiterated to Seward that official communications should be made only through himself and not directly to Canada.¹³⁰ To this the Secretary of State somewhat disingenuously replied that “no agents were employed for any objects affecting the relations between Canada and the United States.”¹³¹ Head’s direct superior the Colonial Secretary however was deeply concerned about British neutrality being compromised and informed the Governor General to “continue quietly to discourage all Missions whether from the United States or from the Southern Confederacy.”¹³²

Newcastle, with as much reason as any for feeling apprehension following the Secretary of State’s remarks to him, wrote that Seward’s “idea I have no doubt, is to prepare the minds of the mob for war with England, if the result of the quarrel with the Southern States should render an inroad into Canada a measure of political advantage” giving further

¹²⁹

Adam Mayers, *Dixie and the Dominion*, (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 2003), p. 26.

¹³⁰

Ibid, p. 40.

¹³¹

Lyons to Russell, 22 April 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

¹³²

Head to Newcastle, 25 April 1861, Harpton Court Collection, HCC 1531: C/1531.

credence to the notion of the US organising for an attack on British North America as compensation for the loss of the South.¹³³ Friction was also caused by notification that the Secretary of State had positioned additional American consuls in smaller Canadian towns in order to counteract pro-Southern feeling. The Foreign Office became even more wary of a perfidious Northern influence in the provinces, perhaps with the intention of politicising them into the Federal orbit. Lyons forwarded a request from Russell to the State Department “that the Government of the United States will abstain from multiplying its Consular Offices in Canada without actual necessity.”¹³⁴

Security in North America and maintaining relations with France

Even the Secretary of State's effort to reach terms with the European Powers on the Declaration of Paris was interpreted as a nefarious tactic to arrest the Confederate war effort and/or to draw Britain into the conflict. Seward wished to sign up to the fourth article which stated that “privateering is everywhere abolished.” Russell wrote that a European nation entering the agreement “would be bound to treat the privateers of the so-called Confederate States as pirates”, thereby making the declaration of neutrality untenable and forcing Britain to renounce Southern belligerency. In order to prevent Britain becoming involved therefore the imperial government requested that the preface be added: “in affixing his signature to the Convention of this day ... the Earl Russell declares ... that Her Majesty does not intend

¹³³

Ibid.

¹³⁴

Lyons to Seward, 8 May 1862, PRO 30/22/37.

thereby to undertake any engagement which shall have any bearing, direct or indirect, on the internal differences now prevailing in the United States.”¹³⁵ That forcing Britain to withdraw the South’s belligerent rights was Seward’s aim had been conveyed by the Secretary of State to the French Ambassador in Washington Henri Mercier. Mercier passed this on to Lyons who wrote “Seward will be furious when he finds that his adherence to the Declaration of Paris will not stop the Southern privateering.” When questioned by Adams Russell responded “Her Majesty’s Government decline to bind themselves ... to a Convention which ... might be construed as an engagement to interfere in the unhappy dissensions now prevailing in the United States.” Already alert to the possible initiation of Seward’s ‘foreign war policy’, Russell feared that if Britain entered into the agreement with the US but then refused to arrest Confederate sailors as pirates, Seward had further ground for a diplomatic break with London. The Foreign Minister suggested this to Palmerston writing that “it all looks as if a trap had been prepared.”¹³⁶ In an attempt to contain Seward’s ‘bullying’ tactics therefore and to guard against conflict, Russell also requested that the agreement only be entered into if signed simultaneously by the US minister in Paris and the French government.

The proximity of British North America moreover carried a dual danger and for this reason entering into accord with France served a corresponding dual purpose. This was because not only would war in North America place extreme demands on imperial resources, but the fear existed that European rivals would seize upon any North American distraction to make gains on the continent. Chief amongst these was France given the suspicion of Napoleon, the recent war scare, and the nations’ historic rivalry. As Anglo-American relations encountered difficulties therefore the Foreign Office sought to counteract

¹³⁵

British Parliamentary Papers, 1862, Lords, Vol. XXV, “Correspondence respecting International Maritime Law”, No. 28.

¹³⁶

Russell to Palmerston, 26 August 1861, Broadlands, MS 62.

both the tension with Seward and the danger of European conflict by maintaining a united front with France on American policy. Using a metaphor that would become famous in the Civil War, Russell told the British ambassador in Paris Robert Cowley "I am not disposed to walk alone in the hornet's nest at Washington."¹³⁷ Equally the Foreign Office had felt compelled to act due to the knowledge that one of Seward's tactics was to split the European powers against each other. This had been substantiated by a statement given by the American minister to Russia Cassius Marcellus Clay as he passed through Paris. Clay had told French reporters "although England might not improbably decide to mingle the red crosses of the Union Jack with the piratical black flag of the Confederate States of America, France would certainly unite her Tricolour with the Stars and Stripes; nor would France forget what power it was that had checked her advance at every turn, had hedged in all the fields of her glory and had confined an earlier Napoleon on St Helena."¹³⁸

In fact, with the French manufacturing industry suffering even more from the blockade than Britain's, Louis Napoleon's government would come to be even more forthright about recognising the South and would later attempt to exploit America's troubles by intervening in Mexico. With Britain and France both anticipating Confederate independence, it was determined that they must proceed in unison until the North had come to accept separation. Russell told the American Minister in London that "there existed between this government and that of France which would lead both to take the same course as to recognition, whatever that course may be." This statement however, refusing to rule out recognition and compromising the plan to isolate the European powers, only increased Seward's belligerency. Lyons wrote to Russell that Seward was "arrogant and reckless towards foreign powers."¹³⁹ Sensitive to the prospect of European recognition and therefore

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Russell to Cowley, 12 June 1861, PRO 30/22/104, National Archives, London.

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Jordan & Pratt, *Europe and the American Civil War*, p. 14.

¹³⁹

Lyons to Russell, 2 May 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

perceiving hostility in anything that afforded the Southern authorities the image of a legitimate government, various dialogues taking place between British and Confederate representatives increased the diplomatic tension with the North still further. In some instances however, for example when it was necessary to represent British expatriates in the seceded states, it was impossible for Palmerston's government to give no credence to the Confederate authorities at all. Generally British Consulate offices in the South liaised with the legation in Washington and less frequently directly with the Foreign Office directly. Following secession however - as the Confederate government regarded the British minister in Washington as ambassador to a "foreign country" and therefore "unqualified" to guide consular matters in Confederate territory - consuls in the South were advised to communicate exclusively to the Foreign Office.¹⁴⁰ Frustrated following complaints by Seward, Lyons wrote to Russell that "Britain really had no choice but to converse with the Confederate Government for there was no other body which could provide for the safety and security of British subjects and British property now residing in the states in rebellion."¹⁴¹

The Secretary of State requested the recall of the British consul in Charleston Robert Bunch following the discovery that negotiations had been carried out with the Confederate government over the Declaration of Paris, and of correspondence in a British mail bag which included a letter stating that Bunch had communicated "that the first step to recognition was taken." Russell perceived it as a means to show Federal displeasure at European policy towards the South, writing that "Mr Bunch has merely been selected as a safer object of attack than the British or French Government."¹⁴² Russell's refusal to order the consul home led to Seward revoking the exequatur which the Foreign Minister took as evidence of the

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Eugene H. Berwanger, *The British Foreign Service and the American Civil War*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), pp. 6-7.

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Lyons to Russell, Russell Papers, 4 November, 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

¹⁴²

Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, p. 194.

British and French view that the South must become independent. Russell called it “an admission which goes further than any acknowledgment with regard to those States which her Majesty's government have hitherto made.” Russell himself held an audience with two Confederate emissaries in London who had journeyed over to advance the case for recognition. The Foreign Office justified this according to the policy that meeting representatives of independence movements in an ‘unofficial’ capacity was standard practice. As with every other indication that Britain was venturing towards an acknowledgement of Southern independence, this enraged Seward and Adams. The Secretary of State attributed Britain's sympathy for the Confederacy to selfish economic motives. Despite Russell's arguing that meeting the Confederate envoys in an informal capacity was routine policy, it was followed by the most alarming indication yet that there would be an eruption in British North America.

Execution of the Foreign War Panacea

On May 17 the Secretary of State wrote “Great Britain is in danger of sympathising so much with the South, for the sake of peace and cotton, as to drive as to make war against her, as the ally of the traitors ... I am trying to get a bold remonstrance through the Cabinet before it is too late.”¹⁴³ Lyons sensed that Seward was planning to initiate the foreign war policy. He had rightly ascertained that having been overruled in his policy of withdrawing from Sumter the Secretary of State was attempting to impose his own will over Lincoln. Seward had delivered his infamous memorandum “Some Thoughts for the Consideration of the President”. This document suggested the US “seek explanations from Great Britain and Russia, and send agents into Canada, Mexico and Central America to rouse a vigorous continental spirit of independence.”¹⁴⁴ This further raised the spectre of the United States

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Ibid, p. 90.

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attempting to agitate the provinces into discontent. While not knowing the precise details of the Secretary of State's scheme, Lyons suspected that the neutrality and belligerency proclamations would be used as pretext for an attack on British North America. Lyons wrote to Russell on May 20 "Seward, having lost strength by the failure of his peace policy, is seeking to recover influence by leading a foreign war party; no one in the Cabinet is strong enough to combat him."¹⁴⁵ In this last supposition at least Lyons was mistaken, Lincoln dismissing the memorandum and making pacifying amendments to the Secretary of State's aggressively drafted despatch to Adams, leaving Seward no choice but to defer to the President.

This incident nonetheless enhanced the pressure on the imperial government to secure the provinces, especially when British statesmen received further reports of Federal attempts to destabilize British North America. Lyons was informed by a British Consul of a plot involving the Secretary of State's son Frederick Seward, who had been overheard discussing an operation to promote annexation in Canada and New Brunswick. Secret Service funds were to be used to purchase a number of British North American newspapers and spread agitation for admission into the Union. While the report's veracity is doubtful it is significant that Lyons clearly believed Seward capable of such machinations. The British Minister took it seriously enough to write to Russell that that there was "only too much reason to believe that Mr. Seward would see with pleasure disturbances in Canada."¹⁴⁶ Even more alarmingly, on June 4 the same Consul informed Lyons of a planned invasion of the province from Buffalo by the 69th Irish Reserve Division. This was the first of numerous occasions both throughout the Civil War, and especially after it, where security concerns over British North America would centre on the threat posed by the American Irish

Winks, *The Critical Years*, p. 33.

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Lyons to Russell, May 23 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

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Lyons to Russell, May 10 1862, PRO 30/22/35.

population, in part motivated by advancing the cause of Irish Home Rule. The Canadian Press also erroneously reported that Buffalo's Fort Porter was being garrisoned by Federal forces as a prelude to attack on the province.

As the Civil War progressed therefore, security fears increasingly emanated from other sources than the proceedings of the Department of State. Ominous reports had also begun to circulate from the expanding United States army. The Union Commander in Chief Winfield Scott was widely held to advocate the conquest of British America and loved to recount his experiences as a young Brigadier General in the War of 1812. Lyons also heard that the words of Yankee Doodle were being changed in Union army sing-songs to: "Secession first he would put down/ wholly and forever/ and afterwards from Britain's crown/ he Canada would sever."¹⁴⁷ In the Senate Chamber too Congressmen were speaking of a short war with the South followed by a northerly expansion of New England. Belligerent sentiments were also coming from the newspapers. In Seward's riding the New York press were calling for a three-year armistice between North and South during which time their forces should unite to sweep through British and Russian America and Latin and Central America.

Manifold suggestions of danger to the provinces were perceived therefore among political circles in Washington DC, the military hierarchy, and the Northern Press. That even Lyons was affected by this general atmosphere of uncertainty can be seen in a cipher telegram he sent to Russell on June 6 which stated that "no new event has occurred but a sudden declaration of war by the United States against Great Britain appears to me by no means impossible, especially so long as Canada seems open to invasion."¹⁴⁸ Lyons's feared the San Juan Island dispute could be conflated into an excuse for attacking the provinces, particularly when George Pickett, heading up the American force on the island, was said to

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Ibid.

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Lyons to Milne, 6 June 1861, FO, Vol. 765, No. 253.

be intentionally goading the British troops. Lyons urged Russell that the affair needed to be settled as soon as possible and it was decided the matter should go to arbitration. Lyons also ciphered to Britain's Naval Commander in the North Atlantic Admiral Milne that in the event of imminent hostilities he would be alerted with the signal "could you forward a letter for me to Antigua." Milne in turn told his officers "Be on your guard and prepared. States may declare war suddenly."¹⁴⁹

The complexities of reinforcing British North America

This tense climate served to further entrench the British policy of standing firm and resolute in its diplomacy with the Union, and also encouraged a new effort towards military readiness on land. Even if the worries of Lyons and Milne about a sudden attack by the US did not materialise, the foreboding about 'compensation' at the war's end remained. Therefore partly at the behest of the British Commander in North America Sir Frederick Williams, 3000 imperial reinforcements were deployed to the continent in early June. Williams believed these necessary to counter expected Federal filibustering attempts at the end of the conflict which pleased Palmerston, particularly given his enduring resentment of American filibustering in Central America. The Prime Minister moreover, intent on his policy of deterrence through intimidation, insisted they be sent out on the Great Eastern, "the largest and fastest vessel which this country had ever possessed", ensuring the deployment was accompanied by huge fanfare. Russell believed that appeasement was dangerous - particularly given the apparent unpredictability of the Secretary of State - and that the best approach was a show of strength and confidence. Lyons concurred, writing to the Foreign Minister that they must "disabuse both government and people of the delusion that they can carry their points with us by bluster and violence, and that we are more afraid of a war than

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Gordon H. Warren, *Fountain of Discontent: The Trent Affair and Freedom of the Seas* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1981), p. 84.

they are.”¹⁵⁰ Russell therefore instructed the British Minister to convey to the Department of State that the troops were justified to provide routine security with a neighbour in the process of mobilisation across the frontier and also necessary due to the discomfort felt from the covert operations in Canada and the Peerless controversy.

Following the reinforcement however many of the unique and complex problems the imperial government would come to face over the security of the provinces during the Civil War came to the fore. The opposition attacked the deployment in parliament, arguing that the bombastic means of transportation would portray a sense of panic or perhaps even provoke US aggression. Derby argued that far from protecting British neutrality or projecting confidence, these troops “despatched in hot haste in a very ostentatious manner ... would bespeak alarm in placing a corps of observation, and even of defiance, on the frontier.”¹⁵¹ Newcastle, like Williams, prophesied that the moment of greatest danger would be the Civil War’s end with the North seeking compensation and/or revenge in an attack on British North America. The Colonial Minister however was more cautious than Palmerston or Russell and like Derby worried about the impact of negative reactions to the mode of deployment. Therefore while it was imperative for British North America to be supplied with imperial troops, this and the military organisation of the provinces should be carried out discreetly so as not to provoke further backlash either at home or in the United States. Newcastle wrote “in whatever aspect ... we regard this war, it is obviously necessary to increase our force in Canada, and assume quietly an attitude of preparation.”¹⁵²

Newcastle however was presiding over a ministry facing huge pressure to reduce its military commitment to the colonies and for this reason alone the reinforcement was

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Lyons to Russell, July 30 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, 6 February 1862, cols. 42-45.

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Newcastle to Lewis, 15 April 1862, CO 880/8.

unpopular among radicals and reformists. Given the resolution in March to pass the burden of defence onto self-governing colonies, any imperial action in the provinces was liable to be accused of being a retrograde step – particularly an act as demonstrative as the Prime Minister's. Palmerston's use of the Great Eastern was accused of being so bold and assertive that it would only cause complacency and inaction amongst the local people towards defence. Benjamin Disraeli, next to Derby the leading voice of the conservatives, claimed that "taking this early opportunity of letting the people of Canada know that we are prepared to assume the monopoly of defending them, is rather calculated to damp their ardour and make them feel that it is not their business to protect their hearths and homes." Disraeli accepted that precautions against border incidents were necessary but questioned that the mother country should supply them arguing that "I can conceive that there may be violations of our frontier and acts of outrage committed by subjects of the American Government. But are there no inhabitants in Canada—are there not a numerous and gallant people there, accustomed to military discipline?"¹⁵³

Indeed, far from displaying a "monopoly" on defence, the harsh truth was that - considering the desperate state of the provincial militias and the rapidly increasing Union army – the nature of the reinforcement was predicated more on bluff than on viable security. *The Times* printed that even with the supplementary troops there would be on average less than two soldiers per mile of British North American frontier and that to override this shortfall the Canadians should be able to provide 50,000 men for defence, which at this time was completely impracticable. Intended to dupe the US about the strength the British Empire could bring to bear in Canada, the reinforcements threatened rather to dupe the provincial peoples that the imperial government could protect them while provoking the Federals to respond in kind. The policy was therefore heavily criticised in the leading newspapers as being counterproductive. *The Times* continued that the British arrivals would only increase provincial dependency on the mother country and argued that the men would be better

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stationed in Europe or New Zealand. Following up on the belief that local security should be provided for by local populations and that the imperial contribution should rest on sea power and use of blockade one editorial declared that “he who attacks Canada declares war against England, and will call down on himself all the might of England, ... but in the matter of her own fields and cities the duty of Canada is to defend herself.”¹⁵⁴ The War Office had planned to send a further three regiments at the end of the summer, however it was dissuaded from doing so, in part due to negative reactions from the public and press.

In attempting to impress on the colonial peoples that they should become responsible for security however, the critical dispute emerged that would hamper defence measures throughout the Civil War. This was that British North Americans conceived that, not possessing a diplomatic voice of their own, conflict with the Union would result from Britain’s failed foreign policy, and therefore be Britain’s issue to deal with. Head wrote to the Colonial Minister that the people of his province believed there were no “causes of difference with the government of the United States arising out of the affairs or interests of Canada a line of weakness through which an enemy might wound England ... in a war caused by interests in no degree of a local ... character.”¹⁵⁵ This left the imperial government stalled in relation to security on the ground. The colonial militias were weak and the local legislatures were evidently apathetic to their improvement.

However if provincial defence was riddled with difficulty on land, it was equally if not more problematic on the Great Lakes. The findings of the Select Committee in March that the proper imperial contribution to colonial security should rest on British superiority at sea produced a critical anomaly when it came to the inland waterways of the North American continent. The Rush-Bagot Agreement signed following the War of 1812 limited the number of heavy vessels that either side could maintain to two on Lake Ontario and one on Lakes

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The Times, 2 September 1861.

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Chester Martin, *Sir Edmund Head's First Project*, (Toronto, 1955), p. 34.

Huron and Erie. While no armed warships were permitted however the capacity of the United States to deploy a force on the lakes if necessary was far greater than that of Britain. The American mercantile marine was numerically superior to that of Canada and therefore dangerous if converted to war vessels. Lake Michigan was completely within American territory and possessed navigable communication with the border lakes. Like the Federal railroad network therefore it gave the US a decided advantage in deploying resources swiftly in case of necessity. As *The Times* put it: "those who were well acquainted with that frontier entertained the opinion that its proper protection would be gunboats on the lakes, not men scattered in small numbers and at distant points on the land."¹⁵⁶

The First Battle of Bull Run and British conceptions of the Civil War

Even despite the tension with the Department of State these problems of local defence in the provinces still had not assumed critical urgency. With Southern organisation and mobilisation gathering pace the United States remained in a much more precarious position than British North America, and imperial assurance appeared to be solidified when the Civil War's first major clash of arms took place. The resounding Southern victory was taken to confirm British preconceptions of both the weakness of US federalism and the certainty of Southern independence. As British people - like American - had anticipated one decisive battle, Manassas further entrenched the view in England that Southern independence was guaranteed. Palmerston scoffed that Bull Run should be termed "Yankees Run".¹⁵⁷ The British and the British North American press featured damning and provocative verdicts on the shortcomings of the Northern Army, a Nova Scotia journal for example lauding monarchical qualities over republican by claiming parallels with England's

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The Times, 4 September 1861.

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Quoted in Jones, *Union in Peril*, p. 57.

Civil War, stating that the South possessed “the haughty, high-born spirit of the Cavaliers’ and the North was the ‘exponent of Puritanism’”. Indeed even within the Federal Army itself there was perceived an inferiority of Yankee republican soldiery to the cultural and historic stock of the British descended troops. It was reported that those with British ancestry were the only Union soldiers to emerge with any credit, a provincial journalist claiming that “the Irish and Scotch regiments fought more in accordance with the monarchical principles taught at Agincourt or Fontenay than with the democratic principles of ninety-day regiments.”¹⁵⁸ The battle therefore reinforced the low opinion in England of the ‘mobocratic’ Federal military. This condescending appraisal of Lincoln’s volunteer army formed essentially the same argument that Colonel Jervois would make when reporting on Canadian security later in the Civil War. Further embedding as it did British sympathies for the South; the battle moreover intensified the ill-feeling between the American and British newspapers and between the Foreign Office and Department of State.

As he had in the Crimea, William Howard Russell was acting as war correspondent for *The Times* and amid the dark atmosphere in the North following Bull Run, reported back more evidence of hostility and danger towards Britain and the North American provinces. Shortly after Manassas Russell had been entertained by Seward and described the Secretary of State reading out a despatch that had been drafted for Adams. Russell wrote that “the tone of the paper was hostile ... there was an undercurrent of menace through it, and ... it contained insinuations that Great Britain would interfere to split up the Republic, if she could.” Here too the persistent risk of the ‘foreign war policy’ was alluded to. Seward told the journalist that he “was pleased at the prospect of the dangers which threatened it” and that “If any European Power provokes a war, we shall not shrink from it.” Confirming British perceptions of the volunteer army however the correspondent was himself content that Federal troops were in no shape for a contest with Britain, stating “I could not but admire the confidence ... of the statesman who sat in his modest little room within the sound of the

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evening's guns, in a capital menaced by their forces who spoke so fearlessly of war with a power which could have blotted out the paper blockade of the Southern forts and coasts in a few hours, and, in conjunction with the Southern armies, have repeated the occupation and destruction of the capital."¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless following the conversation with Seward Russell came to the conclusion that the North would keep its armies ready post-war for a likely invasion of the provinces. The reporter therefore suggested that keeping the North at bay may require an alliance between British and Confederate forces.¹⁶⁰

Canada was holding its provincial election at this time and with armed conflict breaking out on the continent as well as the general feeling of insecurity with the US, the incumbent conservative government argued the need for stability as their platform for re-election. The opening battle of the war also influenced their policy in pledging that they would now start the work on the intercolonial railway. Bull Run had added an extra imperative to the scheme by dramatically proving the importance of railroads in modern warfare. The rapid Confederate reinforcement by train with Johnston's force from West Virginia was as crucial to Confederate victory as Jackson's stand on Henry House Hill. As stated, allusions had already been made to the advantages US forces would enjoy from its railway system in an invasion of British North America both in attacking the land border and supplying the Great Lakes. This issue was later made clear in critical defence report by J.L.A Simmons, who wrote "unfortunately the frontier of the United States is unpleasantly near to the road from Quebec to Halifax; and although no railroads have as yet been made leading from the interior of the United States to the frontier, they have been completed to a point within sixty miles from it, from which there are common roads leading to it; and the population of New Brunswick, which only numbers 250,000 souls, is not sufficient to prevent

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William Howard Russell, 4 July 1861, *My Diary North and South*, 3 Vols., (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1863), pp. 227-228,

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Winks, *The Critical Years*, p. 17.

an inroad upon the line of communication from Quebec to Halifax, and to keep it open.” Because of its association with imperial defence therefore, the intercolonial railway scheme became central to the political agenda and the rival “European and North America Railway” plan for connecting Halifax to Maine was - under the tension now felt with the Union - edged out completely.¹⁶¹ The conservatives’ re-election campaign was successful and it was agreed that a delegation would sail to Britain in the autumn to discuss the terms of a loan to finance the project.

Federal militarisation and the General Defence Circular

Even though the imperial government continued to believe Confederate independence was a *fait accompli*, the biggest factor in Britain shying away from recognition remained the unwelcome prospect of military retaliation by the Union. This had been reiterated by the Secretary of State who told Lyons that “the United States would resist to the last gasp any attempt of the European Powers to interfere in the contest.”¹⁶² Like W.H. Russell, the British Minister now acknowledged therefore that recognition would necessitate a military pact with the Confederacy. Lyons described Mercier’s plan for intervention as futile without “a defensive (if not also an offensive) Alliance with the South.”¹⁶³ Seward’s sensitivity to the risk of foreign intervention was heightened moreover by a European venture in Mexico. The Franco-British alliance had extended to a joint coalition with Spain to settle the foreign debts question, it having been agreed that the mission was solely to extract Mexican debts and no party was to seek territorial or imperial gain.

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Newcastle to Head, 5 June 1861, Harpton Court Collection, HCC 1531.

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Seward to Lyons, 14 October 1861, PRO 30/22/97.

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Lyons to Russell, 28 October 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

This mission was a double-edged sword however in that it offered the prospect of further solidifying the unity of purpose between the European powers, or conversely putting a new strain upon it. Queen Victoria warned Palmerston of being “made a cat’s paw for the mysterious and selfish purposes and plans of the Emperor”, advice the Prime Minister did not especially require given his own suspicions and prejudices against France. Indeed, minor insecurities were already beginning to develop in the Anglo-French accord and these would grow and multiply later in the Civil War. While Britain continued to hold back from intervention, France, experiencing greater hardship from the cotton embargo, was threatening to recognise the South. When broached by Mercier about the possibility of recognition unless southern ports were opened Seward suddenly turned his hard-line approach on the French ambassador. The Secretary of State aggressively stated that the best way for the European powers to ensure resumption of the cotton supply would be to desist from encouraging the Confederate war effort i.e. by rescinding the South’s belligerent status and withdrawing their proclamations of neutrality. In attempting to maintain a friendly tone to the US Mercier had made comments which were relayed to the Foreign Office and that sounded a further note of caution about both the maritime threat of the United States and of France exploiting this challenge to British power. The French Ambassador had told Seward that it had always been the aim of French policy that the United States should be great and strong, and in particular that they should be a considerable naval power.”¹⁶⁴

This insinuation that France desired a “great and strong” rival to Britain carried greater impact as the imperial government was now struck by, not only the progressing mobilisation brought about by the Civil War, but a more general and deliberate militarisation of Northern society. Indeed, Lyons perceived the development of a military-industrial complex which was accelerating Federal power and prosperity at the expense of Britain. He wrote to Russell that these advantages “are held to be happy results of the war and of the

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Mercier to Seward, 1 October 1861, United States. Civil War in the United States. FO 414/18.

new Tariff, and to afford great encouragement in persevering to maintain both. Nor does the satisfaction seem to be diminished by the idea that in this way Europe will be the great sufferers by the American troubles.”¹⁶⁵ Wary of this apparent developing militarism and with the Northern army in the process of being rehabilitated post-Bull Run by new commander General George McClellan, increased concern was again felt over imperial security.

Believing as they did in Southern separation, the breach between the imperial government and Washington also only widened when, following the reverse in Virginia, Federal prosecution of the war subsequently intensified. The suspension of habeas corpus led to a number of British subjects being imprisoned, forcing Lyons to make regular protests to Seward. As Britain perceived this to contradict so starkly the North's claim to be the defender of political liberty sympathy only increased for the Confederacy. The Foreign Minister, who had for so long claimed the US to be corrupt through its excessive democracy, now attacked it for its tyranny, writing sardonically “Her Majesty's Government did not before understand that the President was invested by the Constitution with powers so despotic and so arbitrary.”¹⁶⁶ The impression prevailed in Britain that the war was not a moral crusade for democracy or freedom, but a reactionary stand driven by territory and power. Following one of several Russell speeches accusing the North of fighting for ‘empire’ *The Times* printed “this way of stating the case seems to be thoroughly correct.”¹⁶⁷ Seward tackled this accusation with an extremely strong rebuff - which on this occasion he had printed for public consumption - in turn further alienating Britain. Other draconian Northern policies had a similar political and diplomatic impact. British statesmen were mortified by rumours of Union plans to sink rock-laden vessels in Southern harbours. As with the blockade, by striking Britain's own commercial interests this potential crippling of trade particularly infuriated the

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Lyons to Russell, 4 October 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

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Russell to Lyons, 4 October 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

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The Times, 17 October 1861.

imperial government. Certain that Confederate independence was inevitable, the Foreign Office read into it confirmation of their view that the cause was hopeless. Russell described it as “barbarous” and declared “I must remark ... that this cruel plan could only be adopted in utter despair of the restoration of the Union, the professed object of the war; for it never could be the wish of the United States to destroy cities from which their own country was to derive a portion of its riches and prosperity.”¹⁶⁸

All of these tensions seemed to culminate in the autumn of 1861 with a “General Defence Circular issued by the Department of State which was interpreted in Britain as prelude to war over British North America, *The Times* seeing in it the realisation of the long threatened third party war policy. William Howard Russell concluded “he is determined to resort to his favourite panacea of making the severed States reunited by a war with England.”¹⁶⁹ Lyons wrote to the Foreign Office that “Mr Seward appears to have deemed it advisable to get up a little excitement about the European Powers again.” The cumulative effect of the defence circular, Seward’s belligerent stance over the cotton supply and the publication of his hostile note over the arrest of British subjects deeply concerned Lyons. He wrote to Russell that “Mr Seward’s language to M. Mercier indicates a sudden and very unfortunate return, on the part of this government, to an inconsiderate and unconciliatory policy towards the Powers of Europe.”¹⁷⁰ Anxiety was also felt in the cabinet. In a special colonial office meeting attended by Newcastle, under-secretary Rogers and the recently returned Head it was speculated that this was a Seward ploy to have himself dismissed from the cabinet by going too far in his hostility to Britain and then assume the presidency in 1864 on a wave of Anglophobia.¹⁷¹

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Russell to Lyons, 4 October 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

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Jones, *Union in Peril*, p. 156.

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Lyons to Russell, 14 October 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

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Summary

The Republican victory in the Presidential election of 1860 had brought into power a Secretary of State that not only was a cause of the political crisis with the South but also of diplomatic tensions with Britain. Seward was notorious in England for Anglophobic bluster, expansionist politics, and more unsettlingly for a 'foreign war policy' that he might use to theoretically assuage the Civil War. Already in the early months there had been much discomfort over irregular operations conducted at the behest of the Secretary of State in Canada and rumours of plans to initiate unrest against the imperial government. Federal belligerence towards Britain was in part a response to the comprehension that imperial statesmen wished for separation. Ephraim Adams argued that four major things made the Union believe that Britain would recognise the Confederacy: the Foreign Secretary's noncommittal statement to Dallas; the Declaration of Neutrality; the tight accord with France; and Russell meeting the Southern Commissioners. To this might be added the affording of belligerent rights to the South and the lack of even tacit support for the North either in Britain or in the provinces. This stemmed from the same general motivation that drove the wish for British North American union. Confederation was favoured as a British policy in order to secure the North American provinces from Federal encroachment and eventually challenge the position of the United States. The secession crisis itself now suggested a revised balance of power to this end through the fragmentation of the Union and a sovereign South. The Foreign Office's neutrality and belligerents rights declarations were themselves strategically motivated in being intended to allow the conflict to play itself out with the expected result of Confederate independence. Paradoxically however, while intended to keep Britain away from conflict in North America, by validating the Southern cause and enraging the North, these proclamations appeared to bring the British Empire closer to the brink.

Winks, *The Critical Years*, p. 78-9.

The fear of an all out American attack, either at the conclusion of the Civil War, or in order to extricate itself from it, was made worse by the fact that this was a time at which the imperial government was being driven to reduce military expenditure, particularly in the colonies. The imperial government however had come to realise that it faced a dilemma in needing to reinforce British North America, but not wishing to face a backlash either from public opinion or from the States, it being feared this precaution might provoke an attack by the Federals. Britain's overriding goal - and under these pressures now more than ever - was for the provinces themselves to take the lead in providing for local defence. The people of Canada however apparently did not think security to be their concern as they were innocently and inadvertently made targets solely by their connection with Britain. This issue too linked inexorably to the goal of uniting the British North American provinces, seen as it was a means to enhance the sense of national status of the statesmen and people and devolve greater responsibility to the provinces themselves.

In the interim it remained politically if not ideologically imperative to British leaders to prevent the US overrunning British North America and this issue had been exacerbated by the present situation. The American republican system was anathema to the British government, it being considered a dangerous varying mix of unrestrained democracy and at times despotic tyranny. This had become especially the case during the Civil War with the Union claiming to be defending the freedom and democracy of the people, but yet having curtailed individual liberties and the due process of law. This was the difficult position the imperial government found itself in after a year of the conflict. All of these factors however, Seward potentially bringing on a war with Britain, the security of the provinces, the independence of the South, and the allegiance of France, entered a more critical phase with the onset of the *Trent* crisis shortly thereafter. Of Seward Brian Holden Reid wrote that "British statesmen were inclined to view the American secretary of state ... as a man of words rather than action, full of bluster and empty threats."¹⁷² The following chapter will show

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that, despite a modicum of reassurance of the Department of State's intentions following the peaceful resolution to the *Trent* affair, fear persisted and at times resumed very strongly that Seward would misjudge the threats he could mete out and plunge the nations into war - a point Holden Reid acknowledged later on – and that this uncertainty had a signal effect on increasing the imperial wish to achieve union.¹⁷³

CHAPTER 4

THE TRENT CRISIS, 1861-2

In December 1861 the security of Canada assumed an unparalleled urgency, not only due to the *Trent* Crisis but also just the cumulative effect of the rising apprehension over the past year. Coming off of the back of the general defence circular the *Trent* affair intensified the British cabinet's paranoia of the policies and intentions of the Department of State. Many suspected the seizure to be a deliberate Seward ploy to initiate his foreign war panacea. Russell's secretary at the Foreign Office for example labelled it a "premeditated

Holden Reid, "Power, Sovereignty and the Great Republic: Anglo-American Diplomatic Relations in the Era of the Civil War", p. 47.

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Ibid., p. 67.

scheme to force us into collision.”¹⁷⁴ With this the British Minister in Paris Earl Cowley was in agreement, stating “I wish I could divest myself of the idea that the North and South will not shake hands over a war with us.”¹⁷⁵ Equally the British prejudice against America’s ‘mobocratic’ system determined the enhanced sense of insecurity. Russell wrote to Lyons that “such an insult to our flag can only be atoned by the restoration of the men who were seized, and with Mr Seward at the helm of the United States, and the mob and the Press manning the vessel, it is too probable that this atonement may be refused.”¹⁷⁶ Even regardless of Seward’s culpability therefore, English conceptions of the uncontrollability of US democracy made the imperial government believe that hostilities would be unavoidable. The Prime Minister issued a warning to Lewis about a vengeful press and public dictating US policy. Palmerston told the War Secretary that “The masses will make it impossible for Lincoln and Seward to grant our demands and we must therefore look to war as the probable result.”¹⁷⁷ Lyons had transmitted reports to the Foreign Office about the belligerency in the Northern press that Russell claimed was “manning” US policy. Philadelphia’s *Sunday Transcript* for example stated “If (Britain) is not as cowardly as she is treacherous – she will meet the American people on land and on the sea, not only to lower the red banner of St George ... but to consolidate Canada with the union.”¹⁷⁸ The intensity of feeling was conveyed to the English newspapers too. When W H Russell interviewed Seward in mid-December and raised the possibility of war the correspondent was told, “We

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Cowley papers, FO 519/190, 2 December, 1861

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Ibid.

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Russell to Lyons, 5 December 1861, PRO 30/22/35.

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Lewis to Palmerston, 5 December 1861, *Letters of the Right Honourable Sir George Cornwall Lewis*, Sir Gilbert Frankland Lewis ed., (London: Longmans, 1870), pp 405-406,.

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Sunday Transcript, 17 November 1861.

will wrap the whole world in flames! No power so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned by our conflagration.”¹⁷⁹

The Foreign Minister’s conviction that the Secretary of State and the baying masses were the great danger gave him cause for concern that French support on apprehending privateers would be forthcoming. Russell wrote to Cowley, “if we are forced to go to war with Seward I hope the (French Government) will keep strictly to its oath ... for privateers which I fear will swarm. I have still a hope of a favourable termination. It is the New York harbours against the press and the mob.”¹⁸⁰ It is revealing that the Foreign Secretary referred to “war with Seward” rather than the ‘North’ or ‘United States’. The *Trent* crisis however unleashed the dormant fears, not only over the security of British North America, but facing conflict with European rivals too. The Foreign Minister’s notes to Cowley were mainly preoccupied with French policy on Europe as opposed to the United States. They also made clear that the Secretary of State’s intentions and the preservation of honour were Russell’s primary concerns though he remained relatively confident in the abilities of the Royal Navy. Russell told Cowley that “I think now the American Govt under the inspiration of Seward will refuse us redress. The prospect is melancholy, but it is an obligation of honour which we cannot escape. It is very foolish of the North, for if they had a chance of prevailing it is now – and with our fleet at sea they cannot blockade ... the South.”¹⁸¹ Predicting the Union’s response to the affair Russell wrote “I think they will try to hook in France, and if that is, as I hope, impossible, to get Russia to support them.”¹⁸² In keeping with Russell’s wishes France was

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W. H. Russell, 16 December 1861, *My Diary North and South*, p. 331,

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Russell to Cowley, 29 December 1861, United States: Correspondence Related to the Civil War in the United States, Part 1, FO 881/1047.

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Ibid., 7 December 1861.

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G. P. Gooch ed., *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840 -78*, (London: Longmans, 1925), vol. 2, p. 321.

indeed unlikely to give overt military support to the Union as its immediate concern was with reopening the cotton supply.

For this reason however the British Minister for War George Cornwall Lewis believed that a British-American conflict was in the French interest. Lewis wrote that “it is quite certain that the French Govt wish for war between England and America. The blockade of the South would be raised, and they would get all the cotton which they want.”¹⁸³ More than this however, particularly given Mercier’s recent comments to Seward, the belief existed that France saw the crisis as a strategic opportunity and desired conflict to further build Federal naval power at the expense of Britain.¹⁸⁴ The *Trent* incident therefore threatened not only conflict with the Northern states but enhanced concerns about Napoleon assuming greater command in Europe while Britain was pinned down in the Americas. The Queen expressed “profound distrust in the conduct & purposes of our neighbour.” Palmerston too feared that France was seeking free reign for its forces on the continent. The Prime Minister wrote to Russell “it seems clear from all this the Emperor intends to war on a great scale next Spring, and will therefore make no real reduction in his army or navy ... He will attack Austria with the help of Italy in Venetia, in Dalmatia, and in Hungary. He will attack Prussia on the Rhine, and get up an insurrection against the 3 Powers in Poland, and if we are engaged in a war on the other side of the Atlantic, as seems likely, he will think himself free from our interference.”¹⁸⁵

Untrusting of French policy therefore the *Trent* crisis was the most compelling circumstance yet encouraging alliance with the Confederacy, a strategy that had already

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Lewis to Twistleton, 5 December 1861, in Lewis ed., *Letters of Sir George Cornwall Lewis*, , pp. 405-6.

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Jordan & Platt, *Europe and the American Civil War*, p. 207.

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FO 881/1047, United States: Correspondence Related to the Civil War in the United States, Part 1, Palmerston to Russell, 30 December 1861.

been mooted in the major newspapers and even by the British minister in Washington. It offered strongest prospect yet of redressing the strategic imbalance on the continent by helping the Confederacy achieve independence. One of the chief Northern supporters in Britain, radical John Bright recognised this and wrote to his acquaintance US Senator Charles Sumner "if you are resolved to succeed against the South, have no war with England; make every concession that can be made; don't even hesitate to tell the world that you will even concede what two years ago no Power would have asked of you, rather than give another nation a pretence for assisting in the breaking up of your country."¹⁸⁶ Indeed, as support and sympathy for the Confederacy was widespread in Britain, the affair gave a fillip to supporters of the South. This applied to British arms too, many in the Royal Navy buoyant at the prospect of a British-Confederate alliance. Milne wrote "The ships' companies are in a high state of excitement for war, they are certainly all for the South. I hear the Lower Decks today are decorated with the Confederate colours."¹⁸⁷ The prospect of joining forces with the South however merely increased the spectre of the North attempting to strip Britain of Canada.

Indeed, in congress speculations about a British-Southern pact were not universal unwelcomed due to the opportunities this would offer in a war with Britain. When the President's message was addressed to senators in early December it was posited that the Union would be better not waiting for the Civil War to terminate before attacking British North America. Congressman Alexander Stevens for instance argued that fighting Britain and the South at the same time actually played into Northern hands strategically - a statement Lyons relayed to Russell - which read: "we should be better able to meet England ... with the rebel States in alliance with her than if they were still loyal. They have a vastly extended

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Bright to Sumner, Dec 14 1861, in Foreman, Amanda, *A World On Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided*, (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

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Ibid.

defenceless frontier easily accessible by a maritime enemy. If we were relieved from protecting them, we could use all our forces in other quarters.” It was subsequently made clear precisely where those ‘other quarters’ were; Stevens stated that “we should ... rectify our Eastern and Northern boundaries; and our banner would wave over freemen ... from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean, and from the Bay of St. Lawrence to Puget Sound.” The Senate Chaplain too made veiled references to later military actions “upon a broader scale with a vaster force.”¹⁸⁸

While Stevens’ arguments may have been ambitious, these statements held significant weight in the Foreign Office. Indeed, taking place as it did around a week after the seizure, Lincoln’s annual message to Congress was anxiously anticipated by the imperial government for word of the Federal Government’s perspective on the crisis. While slightly reassured by the fact that the President made no explicit reference to the incident, other aspects of the speech contained inferences of menace towards Britain. In refuting the practicality of Confederate independence Lincoln stated that there was no “natural boundary” between the northern and southern states. This was interpreted by some however as a subtle reference to the fact that there also was no ‘natural’ barrier between the US and British North America, it being a frontier incorporating lakes and rivers with some parts of the US lying north of the Provinces and vice versa. Lyons informed Russell moreover that the general feeling in Washington suggested hostility writing “the language used by the President ... in speaking of foreign Powers has caused no small degree of disquietude here. It is held to indicate suspicion and irritation on the part of this government.”

Still more alarming for imperial security in the present climate was a reference by Lincoln to militarising the Union shores on the lakes. Lyons wrote to Russell that “I have reason to believe that no little alarm will be excited in Canada by the recommendation which the President addressed to Congress to erect fortifications and make depots of arms and

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ammunition at well-selected points along the great lakes and rivers.”¹⁸⁹ As a result concern grew about the Union going a step further and placing armed vessels on the waterways, currently prohibited under the Rush-Bagot agreement. With its commercial marine and communications advantage the US had a much stronger start point for bringing a force to bear on the lakes. Conversely the imperial government, proceeding with its policy of cut-backs, did not even maintain the ships allowed by the terms of the 1817 treaty. The American vessels disarmed under the treaty had been covered and could now be put back into use, while the British ships had been left to rust and were now unsalvageable.

The defence of British North America

When word reached the provinces from London, making some attempt to secure the Great Lakes (a key weakness in Britain's defence policy) was among the chief concerns. The Canadian legislature requested to know what Britain's strategy would be should war come and was told that the key positions to secure were Quebec, Montreal and Halifax; the imperial seat of government, key communications hub along the St Lawrence River and primary British naval base in the region respectively. Protecting Quebec and Montreal however depended largely on commanding both the St Lawrence and the Great Lakes. This in turn rested on the safe-keeping of the Beauharnois, Cornwall and Welland canals and concentration of troops would therefore be required for their protection. Indeed, if the Welland canal were to appear in danger of falling into American hands it would have to be destroyed as it was the key conduit between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron.¹⁹⁰ The first instruction that reached Canada from London was the Colonial Minister informing Monck that the Canadians must defend themselves with Britain providing back-up, this taking the form of

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Ibid.

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United States. Correspondence Related to the Civil War in the United States. FO 414/18.

11,000 extra reinforcements. These were sent out in December and were deployed for the defence of the vital imperial positions.

Indeed, in keeping with the resolution made earlier in the year, the British contribution would primarily be confined to the efforts of the Royal Navy, imperial troops only performing a supporting role on land. Lyons had warned Milne early on that war was imminent and he should be prepared and late in the year he offered fresh advice not to scatter his forces. The American Navy by this time could boast roughly 260 vessels, a force six times larger than Milne's squadron. While numerically inferior however, to Milne's advantage was the fact that his squadron was steam powered as oppose to the largely sail ships of the US. Whereas too the US navy was largely ad hoc the regular British fleet was more strongly imbued with experience and professionalism.¹⁹¹ The Navy's strategy was to immediately break the Federal blockade off Florida, Virginia and the Carolinas, then impose its own on the North. The strides of the Federal Navy however, together with the unsuitability of the imperial fleet for action on the rivers and lakes, spawned fears over brown water defence and even that of Halifax, the paramount naval station to defend. The Duke of Somerset had declared himself too preoccupied with the naval arms race with France to seriously consider to lacunae of the North American continent, particularly when the powers were at peace and military thinkers had felt secure about war with the US. There were two ironclads in service but they were not fitted for coastal use, making the Royal Navy vulnerable to the US Monitor. This gave similar worries over the defence of the Great Lakes and the St Lawrence, as well as the St John River.¹⁹²

Security on land now too started to become an urgent concern as under this strategy and due to the imperial cutbacks of the antebellum decade, the general defence of the

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Greg Marquis, *In Armageddon's Shadow: The Civil War and Canada's Maritime Provinces*, (Queens, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. 27.

¹⁹²

Ibid., p. 13.

provinces would be left to the colonial militias, forces that were in a state of degeneration. New Brunswick for example had only 50 companies of volunteers, poorly equipped with old flintlock muskets and possessing next to no ammunition. Still more alarmingly an 1860 change to the law left the Lieutenant Governor Arthur Gordon unable to call up the trained and drilled militia remaining dormant from the Act of 1854, and Gordon was even doubtful that the colonial assembly would agree to meet early to effect a change. On December 23, Gordon wrote to Colonial Secretary asking him to pave the way for solving the matter writing “my hands may be materially strengthened by a dispatch from your grace pointing out the inconvenience of the existing act and the necessity for its reconsideration.”¹⁹³ In Canada at least Monck gained the assent of his local legislature to arm the militia and form the men in artillery and engineer companies, however these men too were chronically short of arms, there not being enough weapons to equip the sedentary force.

The Governor General was nonetheless concerned to maintain calm within the provinces. Monck therefore did not wish more rifles to be transported from Halifax, and requested Williams to prepare “as quietly as possible, not on the account of the Americans but lest an alarm and panic should be excited amongst our people.” Monck in Quebec and Lyons in Washington had urged “vigilance and quiet” among British subjects in North America prior to instructions being received from London. Concern would especially be felt over the New Brunswick/US border and Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia the Earl of Mulgrave was reminded to send messages to Monck by personal messenger through the provinces rather than the usual winter route through Maine. Williams was also asked not to use the telegraph for secret correspondence.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, the position of Maine, lying on New Brunswick’s western border, gave it enormous importance in the present climate. This factor

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Gordon to Newcastle, 23rd December, 1861, Office of the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, RG7-G-8-B.

¹⁹⁴

Ibid.

now contributing to the sense of insecurity over British North America linked to the want of viable communications believed essential to form the groundwork of provincial union. Both the canal and railway networks were located close to the American frontier and were especially vulnerable with no natural defences existing between the two. Gordon complained to the Colonial Minister that there was no inland telegraph line to communicate with Canada and “consequently all messages for that province have to be transmitted by what is called the American line, along the valley of the St. John. This line would in the event of war be manifestly insecure, and being, moreover, not ... under the control of the Government, is hardly to be depended upon for secrecy.”¹⁹⁵

As with the militia however – and also the imperial government was soon to find the fortifications - it was a struggle to make the local legislatures contribute to improving the communications. Gordon had attempted to impress on New Brunswick parliament the importance of keeping the roads open lest military necessity require it, informing Newcastle that “I have taken every opportunity of impressing upon the members of the executive government the importance of keeping the highways carefully free from all obstructions”. It appeared however that the provincial legislature was masking the weakness of the road networks in order to avoid contributing to repairs, much to the frustration of the Lieutenant Governor. Gordon told the Colonial Secretary that “owing to a natural unwillingness on the part of the executive government to expend the public money without urgent necessity I have found a disposition on their part to elicit more favourable accounts of the state of the roads than are I fear borne out by the facts.”

The Railway and State of Maine

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All of these logistical shortcomings emphasised the lack of a trans-colonial railway and added to the argument for its creation. Ironically, the British North American delegation was in London when the *Trent* affair broke, having arrived to negotiate the loan for its construction. Speaking of the seizure Canadian representative Joseph Howe, who would become a critical opponent of the Confederation movement, stated “this mortal blow, aimed at our national honour gives of course importance to our mission.” Howe graphically warned what would be the Canadian fate if the Federals invaded, telling the imperial government that “our cities would be captured, our fields laid to waste, our bridges blown up, our railways destroyed”, while women “would become prey to a soldiery drawn from the refuse of society in the old world and the new.”¹⁹⁶ Gladstone however, whose prerogative it was to confer the loan remained dedicated to economising on the imperial commitment and therefore on making Canada accept the duty of defence. Regarding the money, the Chancellor privately spoke of the objectionable features of these “helps to other people who might help themselves.”¹⁹⁷ Gladstone did therefore impose the condition that the loan came with a ‘sinking fund’ making repayments due yearly beginning in the current financial year. Under the current strain the home government rather preferred to turn the focus around and ask what assistance they could expect to receive from Canada which led to tense counter accusations of imperial neglect. At the War Office for instance Lewis met the party to ask them what they had to suggest and was told by one delegate, “why, to fight it out of course; we in Canada will have to bear the first brunt. But we cannot fight with jack-knives; and there are no arms in the country. You have failed to keep any arms at all.”¹⁹⁸

The logistical problem of deploying forces in early winter added to the argument for the railway. Only one troop ship reached Canada before the St Lawrence froze over

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Howe to Mulgrave, 30 November 1862, CO 880/2, No. VXXA.

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Watkin, *Canada and the States*, (London, 1886) p. 84.

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Ibid, pp. 86-7.

meaning that the rest had to land at Halifax, Saint John and St Andrews and the men be marched overland.¹⁹⁹ Some, including the 62nd Infantry Regiment, were disembarked at St Andrew and from there had to be transported by sleighs to Canada via Woodstock. From there it appeared the threat emanating from Maine was fairly benign. One of this regiment's lieutenant-colonels observed that in Houlton, Maine, extremely close to Woodstock across the frontier there could be seen only a few dozen volunteer militia "whom I saw marching in the town without arms, to the inspiring air of Yankee Doodle playing on a small fife accompanied by a big drum." Despite this the imperial government's predominant security concerns were with the most north-easterly of the American states. Gordon and Major General Charles Hastings Doyle – who would become the next Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia - discussed defence of the lower provinces and concluded that Saint John and Woodstock were practically indefensible. Doyle's priority was the northern end of the river at Woodstock, which he told Gordon would be "difficult if not impossible to defend." It would likely form the first objective of an invasion as once in possession of the town, the Federals would possess the ability to descend the river and commence "laying under contribution the richest and most important counties of the province."²⁰⁰ The danger was that Woodstock was situated less than ten miles from the United States border and was reachable from several routes directly connected to a great military road through Maine. It was therefore contemplated adopting the same strategy as in the War of 1812 and occupying the eastern portion of the state. The benevolence of the locals on that occasion made some British commanders optimistic it may pay dividends again. Milne even believed that with its economic interests essentially similar to those of British North America it might consider Britain a natural ally and therefore went so far as to posit that if Maine was spared attack "that state might be inclined to change masters."²⁰¹ The Colonial Minister too endorsed the

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Marquis, *In Armageddon's Shadow*, p. 26.

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Gordon to Newcastle, 25 November, 1861, RG7-G-8-B.

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scheme, telling Watkin “by the way, I have heard that the State of Maine wants to be annexed to our territory.”²⁰²

Doyle favoured pre-emptive strikes on American ports and coastal towns but due to these political considerations it was rejected by Milne.²⁰³ Gordon’s spies however had also been despatched into Northern towns and reports suggested an incredibly hostile reception would await British forces in the state. Information reached the Lieutenant-Governor that the United States had four regiments in the state, one of cavalry, one of artillery and two infantry, and that hostility towards the empire was abundant. Gordon’s informants described “that spirit prevailing among all classes in Maine as extremely hostile to Great Britain.” This was transmitted to the Colonial Office, as well as specific statements on the Anglophobic feeling among powerful figures both in public sphere and the press. The Lieutenant Governor relayed to Newcastle that “the most influential inhabitants ... (at which places a kindly spirit toward Great Britain was supposed to prevail) ... have come forward ... to join in addresses to and subscriptions for the editors of those newspapers which have most distinguished themselves by virulent abuse of England and H.M Government.”²⁰⁴

The Trent Crisis and losing the provinces

The Federal Army in general concerned the imperial government. As on water, the US land force that Britain would now have to deal with had altered drastically from that which existed even eight months before. In the annual statement to Congress the War Department had set forth its strength, which Lyons relayed to the Foreign Office. The British Minister told

²⁰² Milne to Grey, Milne Papers, 17 January 1862.

²⁰³ Watkin, *Canada and the States*, p. 65C

²⁰⁴ Winks, *The Critical Years*, p. 73.

Gordon to Newcastle, 20 January 1862, RG7-G-8-B.

Russell that “the Secretary of War gravely announces in his report that the United States have raised a greater force than was ever gathered by the First Napoleon; that they have already an army of 600,000 men; that should any emergency demand it, “the Government could promptly put into the field an army of over 3,000,000.” Initially Britain had placed the satisfaction of pride as paramount in spite of the manifest evils of war with the US. Clarendon for example wrote, “I have a horror of war and of all wars one with the United States because none would be so prejudicial to our interests ... but peace like other good things may be bought too dearly and it can never be worth the price of national honour.”²⁰⁵ In the emergency cabinet meeting called when news of the *Trent* broke Palmerston famously walked in and smashed his fist on the table saying “You may stand for this but I’ll be damned if I will” and wanted to “read a lesson to the United States which will not soon be forgotten.”²⁰⁶ At first the Duke of Argyll described it to Gladstone as a “wretched piece of American folly ... I am all against submitting to any clean breach of International Law, such as I can hardly doubt that this has been.”²⁰⁷ 11 days later however the same author wrote to the Chancellor that “War with America is such a calamity that we must do all we can to avoid it. It involves not only ourselves, but all our North American colonies.”²⁰⁸ Gladstone, continually reluctant to release funds for imperial defence, from the start urged the diplomats to forsake strong demands that would make it impossible to avoid conflict. Gladstone replied to Argyll that “it is a very sad and heart-sickening business, and I sincerely trust with you that

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 320; Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America*, p. 247.

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James Chambers, *Palmerston: The People’s Darling*, (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 487; Palmerston to Queen Victoria, 5 December 1861, in George Earle Vuckle Ed., *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, Vol. 4, 1862-69, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926).

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Argyle to Gladstone, 29 November 1861, Gladstone Papers, 44118, fos 176-9..

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Ibid, 10 December 1861.

war may be averted.”²⁰⁹ The Chancellor was anxious that Britain’s critical note to Seward should not be so peremptory that the United States would be denied a “graceful exit.”

Like Gladstone, Russell maintained that Mason and Slidell must be released but was checked in his ardour due to the problems of Canadian defence. The realisation had quickly dawned that, despite the pride at stake, the growth of the Federal army even in the year since on the onset of the secession crisis had changed the strategic outlook in North America. Russell wrote to Palmerston: “I do not think the country would approve an immediate declaration of war. But I think we must abide by our demand for the restoration of the prisoners ... Lyons gives a sad account of Canada. Your foresight of last year is amply justified.”²¹⁰ The Foreign Minister too was becoming about war with the US. On hearing that McClellan thought the “seizure was quite unjustifiable”, Russell wrote “I wish McClellan would be made dictator”, ironically something the General himself had joked about in view of his popularity in the North.²¹¹ Russell reflected favourably on discussions with Adams in which the ambassador offered assurances should Britain’s tone be moderate. The Foreign Secretary wrote that “Adams language ... was entirely in favour of yielding to us if our demands are not too peremptory...If our demands are refused, we must, of course, call parliament together. The sixth of February will do. In any other case we must decide according to circumstances.”²¹²

That the Foreign Secretary was converted to Gladstone’s approach of allowing the US a ‘graceful exit’ is evident from this note. Russell was prepared to wait seven weeks until

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Gladstone to Robertson, 7 December 1861, 44753, fos 128-41.

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Russell to Palmerston, 2 January 1862, Palmerston Papers, Broadlands, MS 62.

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Russell to Cowley, 9 December 1861, FO 881/1047, United States: Correspondence Related to the Civil War in the United States, Part 1.

²¹²

Ibid.

the scheduled start of the next session of parliament to take action in the hope that cooler heads would have prevailed by that time on both sides of the Atlantic. This is what took place with each party accepting the strategic danger of an Anglo-American war. Prince Albert's softening of Russell's letter to require merely an explanation and not an abject apology kept the British demands from being too arbitrary to avert a conflict. Britain stood to lose its North American provinces, the United States the South, Lincoln thus stating "one war at a time". Indeed, despite his early confidence in British naval power meting a lesson, even Palmerston's resolve was tempered by the prospect of a reverse in Canada. The Prime Minister wrote to the War Secretary on December 2 that he did not think the "loss of our North American Provinces a light matter, or one which would not seriously affect the position of England among the nations of the world."²¹³ *The Times* made the same argument, declaring "We can sweep the Federal fleet from the seas, we can blockade the Atlantic cities, but we cannot garrison and hold 350,000 square miles of country."²¹⁴

The need for future deterrence

In regards to the Department of State, Seward's siding with the doves led British statesmen to somewhat revise their impressions. Russell told Gladstone "I do not believe that Seward has any animosity towards this country. It is all buncom."²¹⁵ Lyons had begun to believe that Seward had realised the inadvisability of antagonising foreign powers and wrote to the Foreign Secretary that "you will perhaps be surprised to find Mr Seward on the side of peace...ten months of office have dispelled many of his illusions... he no longer believes ...

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Palmerston to Lewis, 2 December 1861, quoted in N.B. Ferris, *The Trent Affair: A Diplomatic Crisis* (Knoxville, 1977), p. 63.

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The Times, 6 December 1861.

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Russell to Gladstone, 26 January 1862, PRO 30/22/37.

the United States could crush the rebellion with one hand, and chastise Europe with the other.”²¹⁶ Nonetheless for the present the consistent paranoia of mob-rule in the North kept British statesmen concerned, particularly given the negative feeling stirred up by the crisis. From the start of the Civil War the imperial government had worried the Federal Army would turn northward at its close, particularly as – Britain expecting Confederate victory - they would have lost the South. Following the *Trent* affair British statesmen would fear a US attack purely as retribution for the humiliation of having to surrender the envoys and therefore from this time trepidation existed for imperial security in North America regardless of the outcome of the Civil War.

With this comprehension the key impression the crisis gave was that the provinces must be better able to meet a Federal invasion when the expected vengeance was attempted. The Colonial Minister wrote “even if peace be for the present preserved I fear we cannot count upon its safe continuance for any length of time in the present temper of the American people, and it is of great importance that our North American possessions should not again allow themselves to be caught in a state of utter unpreparedness.”²¹⁷ Lyons continued to believe military readiness was Britain’s only option in Canada, urging that imperial forces must be prepared to give a “warm reception” should the Federal attack materialize.²¹⁸ The War Secretary wrote “I do not believe that the Americans will cherish the *Trent* affair in their hearts, & will watch the moment of our weakness in order to be avenged.”²¹⁹ Thus even though Seward’s concessions had – at least temporarily – given the

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Lyons to Russell, 23 December 1861, PRO 30/22/96.

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Newcastle to Monck, 4 January 1862, in Martineau, *Duke of Newcastle, 1811-1864*, p. 305.

²¹⁸

Ibid.

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Lewis to Grey, 22 January 1862, in *Letters of Sir George Cornwall Lewis*, p. 226.

imperial government some reassurance over the Department of State, the residual British prejudice of the American 'mob' continued to fuel concern. The lesson was drawn that the US should not be allowed to perceive Britain's "weakness", the *Trent* affair in this respect reinforcing the imperial government's view that a deterrence policy represented the best strategy for staving off attack in North America. Lyons, better placed than anyone to observe the effects of British foreign policy, wrote that "diplomacy would have done little toward settling the Trent question, had not the military preparations come in aid of it" and that "the preparation for war ... has prevented war."²²⁰

For this reason great satisfaction was taken that despite the extreme difficulty of the weather the imperial reinforcements had been deployed efficiently. Gordon informed Newcastle that "it cannot be otherwise than most satisfactory to H.M Government to learn that an undertaking so difficult as the movement in this climate of a large body of troops and guns over a long line in the depth of winter has been attended with such complete success."²²¹ During the march from Saint John to Canada there were four fatalities, two from pneumonia and two from the effects of "excessive drinking", given the circumstances a low rate of loss. Only one case of serious frostbite occurred by which one soldier of the 16th Regiment lost both hands. As a result the very difficulty of deploying the troops at such an inhospitable time of year was transformed into a virtue by Palmerston in order to refute accusations made by the opposition that the government had been remiss in not sending the extra troops the previous summer. It was also furthermore presented as evidence that the government's defence policy of firm deterrence had proven successful in the affair. The Prime Minister told parliament:

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Lyons to Russell, 3 January 1862, PRO 30/22/76; Lyons to Milne in *ibid*.

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Gordon to Newcastle, 17 February, 1862, RG7-G-8-B.

I believe it was rather fortunate that we did not send that number then, because I think those who have watched the progress of late events must have seen that the energy and rapidity with which a very large force was despatched to Canada in the middle of winter, in spite of all the difficulties that naturally opposed themselves to such a proceeding - that display of promptitude, of vigour and power, on the part of this country, I am convinced tended very greatly to the peaceful and satisfactory solution of the recent difficulties between this country and the United States.²²²

This was also important in that it was hoped this would influence the other key strand of imperial defence policy – the aim for the provinces to take on the onus for defence themselves. The Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick was confident that Britain's evident commitment would have a galvanising effect on the colonies. Gordon wrote that “the people of this province will learn with the liveliest satisfaction that in case of need H.M Government will neglect no exertions to provide for their protection and defence and Your Grace may rely with confidence on the loyal and gallant spirit which will serve every man in New Brunswick to repel hostile aggression.”²²³ The Foreign Minister harboured a belief that Canadian resolve would have a signal effect on deterring the US from future aggression. Russell wrote “the unanimity shewn here, the vigorous dispatch of troops & ships – the loyal determination of Canada may save us a contest for a long while to come.”²²⁴

Desertion and the State of Maine

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223 *Hansard*, CLXXXV,, 17 February 1862, col 722.

224 Gordon to Newcastle, 23 December, 1861, RG7-G-8-B.

Russell to Lyons, 23 January 1862, PRO 30/22/37.

Though the imperial government was pleased with the deployment however, the increased military presence in North America now caused additional problems for the British authorities to deal with. The desertion of Federal soldiers into the provinces having been a concern since early on in the conflict; this now begun to cause problems in the opposite direction. On February 5 Gordon wrote to Newcastle that "I regret to have to report to Your Grace that desertions have taken place in several corps ... since their arrival in this province and chiefly while in the line of march between Woodstock and the Canadian frontier." Desertion had been a continual problem for imperial forces in North America but was exacerbated now by the increased British presence and the Federal need for manpower. Extended enlistment, stern discipline, low pay and boredom made men restless and made tempting the allure of opportunity and prosperity in the US and the chances for promotion were much higher in the burgeoning Federal army. The problem was summed up by Sir James Ferguson who stated "if temptation at any time was held out to British soldiers to be unfaithful to their colours, how much more danger was there when every trained soldier was worth his weight almost in gold in the United States."²²⁵ This could occur either entirely of their volition or through the efforts of illegal Union recruiting, known in the provinces as 'crimping'. Numerous such cases were reported in London, Canada West and the base for imperial troops, Halifax. Gordon informed the Colonial Minister "I have reason to believe that many subjects of the U.S are constantly engaged in seducing H.M soldiers from their allegiance and conveying them across the frontier." Of equal concern were efforts to induce soldiers from the New Brunswick militia companies to defect to the North and bring with them their British Army issued Enfield rifles. Not only did it threaten to weaken imperial forces while simultaneously strengthening the feared invader: but it was a source of further diplomatic antagonism and tension with the state of Maine, lying as it did so close to St John across the New Brunswick border. One regiment was redeployed from Fredericton to Nova Scotia due to the persistent problem of desertion to Maine. To guard against desertion Doyle

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set up outposts and patrols, a measure which was very successful, only one (failed) attempt occurring thereafter. There were serious issues in the navy too. Following nineteen instances of desertion on the *St George* Milne implemented the 'Aldanah plan'. This was the stationing of a stop and search ship near the port of Halifax to arrest "systematic desertion."²²⁶ The vessel used was *H.M.S Pyramus* which intercepted merchant vessels in the harbour believed to contain Royal Navy seamen.

Relations with the adjoining American states also appeared in jeopardy due to questions over the Reciprocity Treaty. Northern newspapers and the New York press in particular were questioning the benefits to American commerce under the agreement. The terms of the treaty were due to expire in 1864 at which point either or both parties were entitled to give a year's notice of their intention to terminate the arrangement. In February Lyons met with Lincoln and Seward to discuss reciprocity and was told by the President: "In this and in all matters we desire to be good friends with you if we can."²²⁷ The British minister was still however concerned enough to follow this with a written enquiry to the Secretary of State who responded by presenting a letter he had written to the Governor of Maine summing up the will for the agreement not to be interfered with. This exchange however bought back many of the doubts about the Secretary of State. Seward informed Lyons of instructions given to the Governor of Maine permitting the passage of British troops and officers' baggage currently on vessels of the Montreal Steamship Company off the coast, through the state to New Brunswick. It caught Lyons unawares for there had been no designs to transmit men or equipment via this route. It appeared a propaganda exercise by Seward to obtain a high moral perch or to embarrass British arms, or even an attempt to gage public opinion on imperial forces with a view to launching hostile action. The imperial government did not require the offer and Lyons did not wish to have British troops passing

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Winks, *The Critical Years*, p. 195.

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7 February 1862, FO, Civil War in the United States. FO 414/18.

over US territory at the present juncture. If there was hostility from the locals a flashpoint might arise that could spiral to war - while conversely if the soldiers were received without bad feeling it was feared they may desert, or that if war came they would be less battle-hardened out of gratitude to the North. The request for officer's baggage to be forwarded was also superfluous because the Reciprocity Treaty already contained a mechanism allowing for such transmission.

Most irksome to Lyons was the final paragraph of Seward's letter which alluded to the importance of states' rights and consequently iterated the elevation of domestic harmony over foreign. Seward wrote "the Federal Government is fully sensible that ... it owes to each of the states the most exact respect for her rights and interests. The State of Maine has been so eminently loyal and patriotic in the present emergency that the President would not feel himself at liberty to wound any sensibility that she may feel upon the subject. If, therefore, you shall advise me that the directions in question are likely to have that effect, they will be cheerfully modified."²²⁸ It was agreed between Williams, Monck and Lyons that the company should indeed deposit the baggage at Portland for transportation, Lyons feeling that not utilising the Reciprocity Treaty in the current climate would give a further impression of enmity towards the United States. Monck however advised that no military personnel were to get involved in the arrangements as he believed that, following the *Trent* affair the state of Maine was "rancorous (with) animosity and ill-will." The Governor General also admonished the shipping company, erroneously believing they had initiated the situation by making an unsanctioned request to a foreign government, accusing it of causing "inconvenience, at a very anxious moment."²²⁹

In other ways mistrust of the neighbouring state continued to cause the imperial government anxiety over imperial security however. On February 7 Maine's state legislature

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Seward to Lyons, Russell Papers, National Archives, London, 24 January, 1862.

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Monck to Williams, 13 February 1862.

requested an appropriation for defence from the Federal Government which fuelled further speculation in Britain of war with the US.²³⁰ Following this on February 19 *The Times* published reports of an imminent invasion of the provinces, based on this and also Lincoln's "General War Order Number One." This called for a 'general' advance by all Union forces and was likely interpreted as a directive sending the Federal armies into Canada, when in fact it was an attempt to prompt Union commanders (McClellan in particular) into action against the Confederacy using Washington's Birthday as motivation. Given the affiliation between Palmerston and the paper the report may have been treated with serious concern in the government.

The Great Lakes and Burgoyne's report into Canadian defence

Other of the northerly Federal States now also caused discomfort over the safety of the provinces. In February a House of Representatives Select Committee reported on the necessity of establishing depots on the Great Lakes and widening of the Illinois and Michigan Ship Canal. It was claimed that the Rideau Canal gave Britain an advantage on Lake Ontario as it was out of range of Federal guns, quoting *The Times* that the canal could be used to "pour into the lakes such a fleet of gunboats and other craft as will give us the complete and immediate command".²³¹ Equally concerning given the British weakness on the lakes, it was argued that because Michigan was not a "boundary lake" and thus not specifically referred to in the preamble to the Rush-Bagot agreement that the US was within its rights to deploy limitless warships upon it. Petitions were also made in Congress by several of the Northern-most states for appropriations for works which had been neglected on their fortifications. Lyons raised these issues with Seward who responded that it was

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Winks, p. 117.

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The Times, 14 January 1862.

unlikely it would be acted on as congress would be unlikely to vote the money for what was merely the lake states seeking federal grants for state purposes.

Nonetheless this allusion to militarising the lakes was more concerning as this same month the imperial government despatched Colonel Burgyonne to inspect the defences of the provinces and the waterways represented one of the key problems. Burgyonne wrote that “The naval power on the Lakes is one of the greatest difficulties with which we shall have to contend.” The colonel summed up that while beginning at a state of parity, the domestic advantages of the Union’s manpower and logistics, together with its greater commercial marine would allow it to overwhelm Canadian efforts. Burgyonne wrote

the naval power on the Lakes is one of the greatest difficulties with which we shall have to contend. By Treaty, neither Power is to maintain armed vessels on these Lakes, and therefore it would appear that we should, in case of war, start on an equality with the enemy. But this equality is completely destroyed by the superior means in the hands of the United States for creating such a force. Their great populations, their much larger proportion of mercantile naval resources, including steamers on the Lakes, and their great means of transport of resources from the interior, including leading naval ports, would be extremely in their favour in such a contest ... In the upper waters, the States would possess a peculiar advantage, in having one fine district Lake (Michigan) entirely within their own territory, possessing at the same time a navigable communication with the others, while we have but a very partial similar resource on Lake Huron.

Burgyonne’s reference to the Federals’ “great means of transport of resources from the interior” was an allusion to the more extensive railway system of the northern United States, as well as the superior canal network to supply and support their naval force. On this point the colonel also expounded upon the American threat to circumvent the Rush-Bagot

agreement by arming Lake Michigan as it was not technically a border lake. Burgoyne wrote "it has even been rumoured that the States had an intention of evading the above-mentioned Treaty by a subterfuge, and establishing during peace an armed naval force on Lake Michigan, on the plea of its not being a joint occupation, but one exclusively their own." Most worryingly Burgoyne described the way in which imperial vessels on the lakes would find the experience completely alien – in paradoxical ways - to that of the Royal Navy on the open seas. Whereas British naval superiority could at least be disrupted on the ocean by rogue tactics such as privateering, as the weaker party on the North American lacunae imperial forces could not similarly fight and flee as the self-contained nature of the lakes rendered naval engagements therein of an entirely different nature to that in open waters. Burgoyne wrote "there is one peculiarity in a naval warfare on these Lakes, - that while, on the ocean, a very inferior naval force may find means of annoying his enemy by stealing out and roving over the seas, on these Lakes that which maintains a general superiority will effectually in these confined waters, preclude the other from any such injurious action."

The need to take action on the lakes was one of "four leading elements" Burgoyne considered vital to the defence of the province, the other three being fortifications, the organised militia, and the railway and canal communications. None of the other three assumed the urgency of the Great Lakes however, primarily because the Colonel saw no obvious solution and therefore turned back again to long-term consideration of British North America's future. In Britain's favour was the strain the Civil War was putting on the United States economically and politically. Burgoyne believed the increased taxation to finance the war, the damage done to trade, and the loss of personal freedoms was likely to encourage emigration to Canada over the US. The arguments therefore tended to consider the provinces' growth over time and leave security to be decided on a more ad hoc basis. Thus on the construction of a railway, Burgoyne's principal concern was its financial sustainability, particularly given the long-term desirability of promoting emigration to British North America over the United States. Burgoyne wrote "it has been urgently pressed, that it

would be desirable to construct a line of railway ... to which the Imperial Government is required to contribute, as a most advantageous military communication. There cannot be a doubt that such a line would be very valuable, but hardly so much so ... as to justify the large outlay, unless there were a great showing of its utility and probable compensating returns from it for its social and commercial interests.”

The fortifications and militia elements were important in that they related directly to the question of responsibility for local defence, which was still such a cause of frustration in Britain and dispute in the provinces. Burgoyne therefore knew that it was futile to prepare simply a strict appraisal of the troops necessary to repel American invasion as the question “has many social and political considerations mixed up with it particularly as regards the measures that are to be taken up by the mother country and the colony respectively.” Indeed, it was idle to proceed with theories of defence until the division of expense and labour had been ascertained between the imperial and the provincial governments, the Colonel writing “it will be needless to decide upon the establishment and maintenance of certain standing forces, fortifications and other military means that Great Britain will not undertake, and that the colony cannot afford.” The central argument in the mother country was squarely made here that being afforded the benefits of self-government should correspond to taking on the burden of defence. Thus the report stated:

An argument has for years been plausibly maintained, has very recently been advocated strongly, and will probably be discussed before long in Parliament; which is, that colonies like Canada, which have free and independent control of their revenues and affairs, and have had the military lands and reserves handed over to them (in Canada, for instance, to an amount of considerable value), and are absolutely flourishing in a great degree, ought not to remain a burden on the resources of Great Britain for their protection.

In keeping with the imperial government's view Burgoyne contended that the primary responsibility should be shouldered by the provinces. The Colonel wrote "There can be no doubt of the justice and propriety of requiring the colonies to afford all the means for defence they can; let them even (particularly in the larger ones) provide the basis of defence, and Great Britain act only as co-operating, which will confine the great efforts to be required from her chiefly to the period of war, or to that when hostilities were closely threatened." In terms of building fortifications Burgoyne also endorsed the earlier resolution of parliament that they were a financial waste when military progress and innovation threatened to make a defensive work rapidly obsolete and advocated a less dogmatic approach writing "military positions and posts should be fully studied and defined" but only "taken up and strengthened by field works, temporarily perfected and armed during war." Across all of these defence requirements Burgoyne avoided a short term view of the question, opting against permanent forts or imperial forces, and only endorsing the continental railway if it produced long term benefits. Apart from on the Great Lakes where Burgoyne could not propose an adequate solution to the military problem, security was not a pressing concern.

Reconstituting the colonial militias

The same month, seeking to start solving the major issue Burgoyne had identified of reaching an understanding on local defence, the imperial government attempted to initialise the process. Believing that with the strain of the *Trent* affair the moment would be ripe for the provinces to restore the militias, the British War Minister contacted Newcastle about encouraging them towards this end. Lewis told the Colonial Secretary that "I do not doubt that the attention that recent events have drawn to the subject, will lead the governments and people of the British provinces to desire to set on foot such a substantial force of militia and volunteers as shall command a respect for their territory and provide for its security in cases of emergency."²³² To this end the War Office suggested the employment of imperial

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regulars to assist both in bringing the militias about and guiding their training. The War Secretary asked Newcastle to “ascertain the willingness of the colonial legislatures to make provision for the pay and allowances of the officers and non-commissioned officers whom it may be desired to remain in colonial employment.” Gordon was cooperative in New Brunswick where the Lieutenant Governor had always been pro-active in attempting to re-energise the militia. Like the problems Mulgrave had experienced in Nova Scotia Gordon had a serious issue with aging commanders. The volunteer militia companies were under the leadership of lieutenant colonels; however no new appointments had been made to these posts since the militia law had expired in 1854 and therefore a large number of commanders were between the ages of 70 and 90 and unfit for active service. Under Gordon’s proposed changes all officers over the age of 60 – excepting those who the lieutenant governor himself was satisfied still possessed the physical and mental attributes required for service - would be placed on the retired list. Gordon also proposed to stand down the aging adjutant general and deputy and replace them with officers of the regular army residing in the province but not on active service. Gordon was therefore keen to implement the imperial government’s wishes, desiring to appoint non-commissioned officers from the British army as drill instructors to instil this new professionalism in the militia.

Despite this initiative however the home government continued to be frustrated, Canada in particular reticent to make use of the imperial troops. Lewis sent a circular despatch to Williams and Doyle on February 22 “that it had been intimated to him that there is some hesitation on the part of the BN American colonies to employ the officers and non-commissioned officers who had been sent out to assist in organising and training the volunteers.” The War Secretary therefore requested that Doyle and Williams confer with Monck to try and make the arrangements themselves.²³³ Britain had to confront the problem however that in the self-governing provinces the imperial governors had insufficient power to

Lewis to Newcastle, 16 February 1862.

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Ibid.

impose such wishes. The under-secretary of the War Office wrote that “although Sir George Lewis considers the present a most favourable opportunity for placing the militia upon a proper and satisfactory footing and thus rendering it efficient in the event of any future emergency it must of course rest with the provincial government to decide as to the measures to be adopted with this view.” The metropolitan government nonetheless felt that the culture of Canada would make it ideally suited to produce a formidable militia force. According to the Foreign Office it was the “sanguine hope of the Home Government” and “the deliberate conviction of military critics in the Colony” that the rural population—a hardy race, accustomed to field sport, the use of fire-arms, and an active self-reliant life—would, under the command of trained officers and non-commissioned officers ... easily and in a short time be formed into a most efficient body of troops for the defence of their country.”²³⁴ For communities reliant on an agrarian economy however the months selected for training clashed with the hunting, fishing and tree-felling seasons from which men could ill be spared. Indeed according to reports into the problem “the real difficulty connected with military organization in Canada occurred in the rural districts’ as the volunteers primarily were found in the towns.”

In New Brunswick at least the new militia act was passed. Even here however Gordon remained concerned that the local legislature was not sufficiently earnest on defence. One of Lieutenant Governor’s reservations was that the act would only stand for three years. Gordon wrote “hitherto the Militia, however imperfectly constituted has been one of the recognised institutions of the Province, but henceforward if the Law regulating its existence is to be passed for that period only, its continuance cannot be relied on with any confidence.” The new act divided the male population into two forces, the ‘active militia’ - including all men between the ages of 18 and 45, and the ‘secondary militia’ - for those between the ages of 45 and 60. Both the active and secondary militias were then split into three groups, ‘A’ being volunteers, ‘B’ being single men and widowers, ‘C’ consisting of

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married men and widowers with dependants. Training would begin with the first group, the second two forming a reserve. A further concern of the imperial governor however was with the resources allocated to train and equip them. On paper Gordon could call out 48 regiments amounting to just over 40,000 men however there were merely 200 rifles available to equip them. The overall expenditure allowed for the instructor and drill ammunition was £2000, leaving a chronic shortage. The little artillery the militia possessed were obsolescent smooth-bore, low-calibre models. Gordon, like Monck in Canada, felt effectively powerless to impose himself on the provincial legislature writing: "I thought it better not to press this point, as I should certainly have failed to obtain the assent of my responsible advisers, or of the Provincial Legislature to such a suggestion." The lieutenant-governor laid out explicitly his view that the matter would be safer in imperial hands, writing: "It would in my judgement have been more conducive to the efficiency of the force had the funds granted for its maintenance been placed at the disposal of the Commander in Chief, as in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia & P.E. Island instead of at that of the Governor in Council."

Gordon also set in motion a plan to appoint three commissioners to report on the military defence of the province. On February 24 he wrote to Doyle requesting the names of three officers deemed fit for the task desiring one from the Royal Artillery, one from the Engineers and one from the infantry. Following the reports the imperial government tentatively began a programme of refortification and rearmament, hoping the provincial legislatures would emulate their efforts. The imperial government focused predominantly on Halifax, the vital coaling station and naval base for imperial forces in North America. Halifax was ostensibly protected by Point Pleasant on the southern tip of the Halifax peninsula, protected by the Prince of Wales Tower, the first Martello tower constructed in North America. This was indicative however of the rest of Halifax's defences, which were becoming antiquated and obsolescent. The citadel of Halifax had had significant imperial funds pumped into it, however lacking rifled artillery it was by 1861 largely outmoded with the changes wrought by new long-range artillery and ironclads. The Colonial Office set out that

Britain should fund the work on Halifax, while work on Partridge Island should be a joint endeavour between the New Brunswick legislature and the home government. It was to be ringed by muzzle-rifle loaders, receive rifled guns and be protected by ironclads. Modifications were carried out to the George Island defences as well as those on Ive's Island to enable enveloping fire on attacking vessels. Moreover the initial work was undertaken on Partridge Island, and another battery was to be placed at Red Head to the East and then Negro Head to the west of the harbour, all to be manned by volunteer artillery companies. This showed a British commitment; however the old fear resurfaced that it would encourage the Provinces to renege on their own responsibility, especially when Gordon's subsequent despatches on the defence efforts showed further recalcitrance on the part of his province. Gordon wrote to Newcastle that "The provincial legislature has not formally declined to contribute towards the expense of fortifying Partridge Island, but those who know its temper best assure the Leutenant Governor that no said contribution is to be anticipated."

The imperial defence budget

Due to the question of responsibility for Canadian defence great pressure was put on Lewis when announcing the Army Estimates in February. Given the wish to reduce the imperial defence budgets there was admonishment that the government's commitment was too great, particularly in the light of the increased colonial obligations undertaken over the past twenty years. Colonel Baillie for example was one critic, drawing attention to Britain's need to deploy forces to aid in conflicts in both New Zealand and South Africa in addition to this reinforcement of Canada. Baillie stated "nobody could suppose that force had gone to Canada for a temporary occasion; because it must be perfectly obvious, when we considered the hostile feelings of the people of the United States, when we considered the great anxiety they had always exhibited to annex Canada, and when we considered the great military force that would be at their disposal at the end of the civil war—it was

obvious ... that that force must be retained in Canada.”²³⁵ Due to the policy of focusing imperial efforts on sea power not only were members rallying against the increased presence of regular troops in British North America but the commitment to building fixed defences excepting those essential for the maintenance of the Royal Navy. Thus a fortnight after the introduction of the Army Estimates a motion was brought in the Commons that “the multiplication of fortified places in distant Possessions involves a useless expenditure; and that the cost of erecting and maintaining Fortifications at places not being great Naval Stations, in self-governed Colonies, is not a proper charge on the Imperial Treasury.”

It was put bluntly to the Colonial Office that there were two categories of forts, ones of imperial significance – and thus to be maintained by Britain - and those of purely ‘colonial’ importance which should hence forth be paid for by local means. The danger however with devoting resources solely to such ‘great naval stations’ was risking the neglect of vital maritime positions that would be critical in the event of war. Newcastle felt that partitioning all of Britain’s naval outposts into purely ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’ stations was far too simplistic, and that they could be divided into five classes of varying commercial and strategic value at least. This was particularly significant in North America given the American preponderance likely to occur in time of war on the Great Lakes. Quebec for instance would in that case become a vital naval station for keeping the St Lawrence open as a lane of communication. This would be essential in order to bring up reinforcements or to use as a line of retreat prior to an evacuation of troops. Arguing Britain’s need therefore in the case of Quebec, Vane Tempest stated that “at that city there were fortifications, but it was not a naval port; and if this Resolution were carried, no further appropriation could be made for those fortifications, although they commanded the River St. Lawrence, and there was no naval station within 2,000 miles.”²³⁶ Gladstone was prepared to undertake defensive works provided their value

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Ibid, 3 March, 1862.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, col. 1098, Colonial Forts, 18 March 1862.

was set out explicitly and completely, the Chancellor arguing that he was “afraid of ... not any grand or comprehensive scheme of fortifications ... but ... of minute demands insidiously made to the House of Commons.”

The government nonetheless faced further criticism that their programme of rearmament and fortification severely compromised their aim of making the colonists taking up more of the burden for security. Adderley questioned “Of what use were the fortifications and garrison of Quebec when we were recently threatened with war? They were not enough in themselves, and they had only prevented the colonists from arming themselves.” The imperial government was challenged by this dilemma of deterring the United States without giving Canada the impression that it was not their responsibility to protect themselves. The recent Select Committee had heard “that for every soldier that England sent out she had prevented 100 Canadians from arming themselves.” Thus it was argued “when danger lately came the colonists were wholly unprepared; and their only chance of safety consisted in the succours despatched from this country, which, but for the remarkable mildness of the season, and the fact that our troops were not wanted for other duty, it might not have been in our power to send out.” This need for the provinces to fend for themselves was imperative because if Britain faced a foreign emergency elsewhere, particularly Europe, it would be forced to prioritise its interests, probably leaving Canada at the mercy of the US. The concern about imperial overstretch was such that the home government would not even commit to stringently dedicating specific naval forces to colonial defence. The War Minister himself admitted “as in time of war it is of the greatest importance to the country that the Channel fleet should be powerful, and that our own shores should be protected against any dangers of invasion, it is impossible for us to lay down abstractedly any principle which would make it necessary for us to scatter our fleet over the whole world, and to defend each of our colonies by a separate squadron.” This reluctance of the government to make binding naval commitments to individual colonies at the expense of home defence foreshadowed the

Colonial Naval Defence Act which later enabled provinces to raise and maintain local maritime forces for the assistance of the imperial navy.

Summary

The *Trent* affair and its aftermath had provided a decided wake-up call for the British Empire. Palmerston's policy was to deter the United States with a show of strength; however it was proving increasingly difficult to enact this in so vulnerable a region as British North America. While achieving the overarching goal of securing Mason and Slidell's release, during the *Trent* crisis Britain had effectively had to back down in accepting a resolution without an apology from the US. This was largely due to the fear of a war which would have resulted in a military reversal in the provinces. The forces coming into being in the North were more than could be withstood by the British reinforcements, meaning that should an invasion occur the colonial militias would be required to supplement imperial forces. These however were in no fit state for action, at present critically undermanned and underequipped. It was therefore incumbent on the British government to encourage the provincial assemblies to take responsibility for placing local defence in order, particularly given the imperial aim of restricting its military budget in the colonies.

The military situation was also making it more urgent to begin the continental railway, the responsibility for which was still a standoff between the home and colonial governments. It was too becoming increasingly evident that Britain's inability to match the United States on the Great Lakes placed it at a tremendous military disadvantage in the event of an attack on the provinces. Against the background of these strategic weaknesses the diplomatic and political situation appeared to be deteriorating still further. The shared frontier with the US placed British neutrality under constant threat, with friction being caused by deserters crossing the border in both directions. Issues with the Northern States were increasingly divisive and growing calls to end the Reciprocity Treaty added to the economic problems brought on by the Civil War. The blockade continued to have an adverse financial effect on

the European powers. These political and strategic difficulties led to an increased clamour in Britain to take the initiative in intervening to end the Civil War and establish Confederate independence. The dilemma over whether intervention would arrest the suffering or intensify it reached its zenith between 1862 and 1863.

CHAPTER 5

THE INTERVENTION CRISIS, 1862-3

With the effect of the blockade becoming increasingly felt in Europe, pressure to intervene was put on the British government by France, still more anxious to act and restore trade with the South. Mercier repeatedly intimated to Lyons that unless a significant Federal military success took place the spring would be the ideal time to offer mediation. British postulations both for and against intervention were primarily influenced by strategic considerations. Even though France had made it clear its policy was to act with Britain to bring about an end to the war, in attempting to cause division between the European powers the Department of State conveyed that all retaliation would be directed against England. Lyons reported back to the Foreign Office that knowledge of the French proposal for mediation had caused consternation - particularly in light of Napoleon's adventure in Mexico, but that the press and public at large were refraining from expressing their feelings, it not

being thought politic to convey hostility to both powers at the same time. Lyons wrote to Russell that the French Ambassador had given him:

various illustrations of the intensity of the displeasure felt towards England, and of the goodwill with which France is regarded. He remarks that, notwithstanding that it has been generally believed that the Emperor has been for some time willing to recognise the South, but has been deterred by England; notwithstanding the Mexican expedition and other circumstances calculated to create irritation, - no serious attack upon France has been made in any newspaper, while the press has teemed with abuse of England.

The same remained true of Seward, the State Department persisting in its plan to treat with Britain and France separately. Lyons wrote of Merciér that "he observes ... that while my position here has been maintained only by extreme prudence and reserve, he has been able to use with advantage the freest language, and to tell unpalatable truths without any disguise." Rumours were also circulating that the North would aid the besieged Mexican state by allowing her to send out privateers from Northern harbours, the British fleet at present sealing off the Mexican coast. Russell was becoming highly vexed by Seward's criticism of Britain's postulation on the conflict. The Foreign Minister had been told by Lyons of a loaded remark made by Seward that the "European Powers, all professing the most friendly feelings to the United States, had been discussing its affairs among themselves without taking the Cabinet of Washington into their counsels." Russell bitterly instructed the British envoy "to take an opportunity of observing to Mr Seward that without taking other reasons into consideration, the perusal of the accounts of the distress in Lancashire, owing to the want of cotton, which he will find in all the newspapers, will furnish him with enough reason for the discussion of American affairs in Europe. Great numbers of Her Majesty's subjects are suffering severe distress in consequence of the belligerent operations of the Cabinet of Washington."²³⁷

Imperial strategic concerns again did not simply rest on potential hostility from the Union but also mistrust of the intentions of the third Napoleon. In discussion with Lyons furthermore Mercier alluded to a Federal belief that France still desired US strength to grow, and that the opposition to intervention therefore had to be directed towards Britain. Lyons wrote

M. Mercier fears that the Cabinet might avail itself of the hostility to England in order to rouse the national feeling against the whole plan of mediation. The Americans, he says, believe that England is jealous and afraid of their greatness, and desires their ruin. They think, on the contrary, that France wishes them to be great, in order to oppose them to England. The Cabinet (which will certainly be strongly opposed to mediation) would, he thinks, be able to count upon the support of a great mass of public opinion against any proposal to which England is a party.²³⁸

The suggestion that France would side with the United States in order to oppose British power was far from a revelation to Lyons in that, as covered in the previous chapter, he had heard of Mercier himself telling Seward this was the case several months before. In this climate suspicion developed of French policy which placed a cloud over the alliance in Mexico and by extension security at home and in the provinces. It was stated in parliament that it was "not pleasant, either, to read of questions that were put in the French Senate as to whether the English could be trusted in Mexico, nor the observations that they were tired of helping England to redress her grievances, and that the money spent in the Crimea and China would have been better employed in invading England."²³⁹ Palmerston's residual mistrust of the French added to the sense of insecurity. The Prime Minister told Gladstone

FO, 'Correspondence with the United States', 5677.

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Lyons to Russell, 17 May 1862.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, col. 555, 10 March 1862.

that the French “hate us as a nation from the bottom of their hearts and would make any sacrifice to inflict a dark humiliation upon England.”²⁴⁰

This sense of insecurity grew when intrigues emerged that Napoleon was working on a foreign policy with the pro-Southern British conservative Lindsay over the heads of both the British government and his own foreign secretary Edouard Thouvenal. Cowley informed Russell of what he believed the conversation to have been, writing “my own conviction is (Lindsay) has told the Emperor his own views, and that those views are supported by the majority of the people of England, and by the present Opposition in Parliament, who would denounce the blockade if in power” and “he has found a willing listener in the Emperor, who would gladly obtain cotton by any means.”²⁴¹ Lindsay and his fellow pro-Confederate MP’s Gregory and Roebuck were hoping to use the evidence that the French were prepared to act to bring on the long-awaited decision on recognition. Cowley told Lindsay that he “did not think ... that Her Majesty’s Govt. would consent to send a squadron to act as the Emperor had indicated ... which might be corrected if ... in error by Mr. Lindsay himself seeing Lord Russell.”²⁴² Perturbed Palmerston wrote to Roebuck “The British Parliament receives messages and communications from their own sovereign, but not from the sovereign of other countries. I am very anxious that neither you nor Mr. Lindsay should mention those matters any more, as any discussion about them must tend to impair the good relations between the French and English Governments.”²⁴³

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Palmerston to Gladstone, 29 April 1862.

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Russell to Cowley, 16 April 1862.

²⁴²

Ibid, 13 April 1862.

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Palmerston MS, 9 July 1862.

Fears of Federal conquest of the South

The imperial government however also feared that, irrespective of the justice of the blockade, intervention would lead to an escalation of the conflict, destroying hopes of a bloodless end to slavery. Russell already believed that in its determination to defy both Britain and the South, if foreign interference occurred Northern policy would be radicalised to the point of initiating a servile war. The Foreign Minister stated that “if owing to the necessity to vindicate our honour, if owing to persuasion that this blockade could not be legally acknowledged, we had been obliged to take part in this war, any thought of ending this great question of slavery by peaceable means would, I am persuaded, have vanished - the North would have proclaimed a general emancipation and liberation of the slaves.” The argument against sparking a race war was also made in economic terms in that not only would it initiate a humanitarian disaster, but it would also remove labour from Southern plantations and thus exacerbate the cotton shortage and hardships in Europe. Forster – who it must be said was also a champion of the Union - implored: “let us not by our interference be instrumental in any way in helping to provoke a servile war. It was said that we should be sure of cotton, but in six months after we interfered the able-bodied negro slaves would probably be converted into Sepoys, acting with the army of the North instead of producing the raw material for our manufactures.”²⁴⁴

The Palmerston ministry believed slavery might undergo a swifter and more humanitarian end in a separate Confederacy. Therefore Britain’s strong anti-slavery sentiment in fact set in tow a type of reverse logic which held that the cause of those in bondage would be better served with Southern victory. The long history of Northern compromises over the institution led to the conclusion in Britain that further concessions would be have to be made in order to bring the South back into the fold. If North and South became separate sovereign states however earlier safeguards which *protected* slaveholders

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such as the Fugitive Slave Law would become void. Slaves escaping across the border into the North would be ensured freedom, Russell writing “for this reason I wish for separation”.²⁴⁵ Even though the Foreign Office wished to see both slavery and the South exit the Union; early 1862 was arguably the only time until the very end of the conflict that British statesmen felt the North might be able to achieve a knockout victory. Indeed following its western victories at Henry, Donelson and Shiloh and with McClellan beginning his massive crawl up the Peninsula the Federals appeared to be on the brink of success. Russell summarised the British view that the South would never be reconciled to the United States and therefore slavery and with it the seeds for future conflict would persist. The Foreign Minister wrote to Lyons that if the North continued towards victory “the Union will be restored with its old disgrace and its old danger. I confess I do not see any way to any fair solution except separation – but that the North will not hear of – nor in the moment of success would it be of any use to give them unpalatable advice.”²⁴⁶

The present Northern dominance, by inhibiting intervention, at least acted to temporarily lessen France's readiness to recognise the Confederacy. With McClellan besieging Richmond and Union armies advancing through Tennessee the British minister in Paris wrote that “there could not be a more inopportune moment for mooted the question both of the recognition of the South and of the efficiency of the blockade. The time was gone by when such measures could, if ever, have been taken – for every mail brought news of expeditions from the North acting with success upon the South; and every day added to the efficiency of the blockade.”²⁴⁷ Following the momentous news of the fall of New Orleans Cowley wrote that Napoleon now “agreed that nothing was to be done for the moment but to

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Russell to Lyons, 2 November 1861.

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Ibid, 17 May 1862.

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Cowley to Russell, 13 April 1862.

watch events.”²⁴⁸ This allowed the Foreign Office to continue with the policy set out the previous year, to attempt to remain in neutral concert with France and await the Civil War to run its natural course. Russell wrote to Cowley that “her Majesty’s Government wish to take no step in respect to the Civil War in America except in concert with France and upon full deliberation.”²⁴⁹

This meant hoping that even should they win the war, the Washington government would realise that they would inevitably fail to win the peace. Convinced that this would turn out to be the case, the attention of the British government turned to the feasibility of governing the re-conquered peoples and lands. Russell wrote “the news from York Town, New Orleans, and Corinth seems to portend the conquest of the South. We have now to see therefore, whether a few leaders or the whole population entertain those sentiments of alienation and abhorrence which were so freely expressed.”²⁵⁰ Russell, believing the southerners could never be reconciled again to the Union but reiterating that recognition would likely mean war until Washington had accepted it, stated ‘It will, perhaps, be impossible to renew the old feeling of union between the North and South ... I trust that—whatever may be their military successes, whatever may be their naval victories, whatever positions they may capture—that the North will consent to a peaceful separation.’²⁵¹

Increasing Federal strength and the resolution that self-governing colonies must contribute to internal security

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Ibid, no date.

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Ibid, Vol. 1422, No. 403.

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FO, America, Vol. 828, No 284, Confidential, Lyons to Russell, 24 April 1862.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Col. 399, 10 March 1862.

The Northern ascendancy on the battlefield however posed a double security concern for the defence of British North America. Not only did it threaten to shut off the strategic benefits that would accrue from Southern independence, but it also added to the perception of an improving and emerging military power. Imperial statesmen were increasingly having their eyes opened to the magnitude of the military host being brought into existence under Lincoln and McClellan, Palmerston having received intelligence of the Union military positions. The Prime Minister stated “it was but the other day that I saw a map sent by the Quartermaster General of the Federal forces, on which were marked out the positions of 720,000 Federal troops - we now hear that 300,000 more men are to be called into the field - —making one 1,000,000 of men.” Palmerston remained instilled with his life-long condescension towards the United States, assuming inherent American weaknesses that he did not wish them to receive help in overcoming. Palmerston therefore told Russell that British military attaches “should be strictly cautioned not to make any criticisms which might be useful to the Federals in pointing out to them faults or imperfections ... The Federals are luckily too vain to attach much value to the opinions of Englishmen, but our officers might be told to open their eyes and ears and to keep their mouths shut.”

The cabinet however were receiving reports that the US armies were indeed increasing in quality as well as in quantity. Beginning to dispel the bad reputation they had attained after Bull Run, observers of their forces were now sending serious warnings to the home government. One wrote to Russell that “I have just seen a letter from an English officer (a man who has seen a great deal of service) who has been taking a look at the Federal Army. A finer one – or one better provided with all things necessary he never ... saw – and he adds ... “that it would require a force of 100,000 men to keep them out of Canada””²⁵² Newcastle was certainly feeling apprehensive of the import for the continent of the new Federal strength. The Colonial Secretary wrote “it is impossible not to feel that every month

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the civil war in the States continues the military disparity between them and Canada increases. Little more than a year ago they were equal. Now Canada has only an embryo and untrained Militia – the States have a trained army, - and the temptation to aggression whenever the war is brought to a close is proportionately increased.”²⁵³

Moreover this was a power expanding into Britain's traditional and vital realm of strength - the seas. The success of Union ships at New Bern, Ronoake Island and on the Mississippi impressed on Britain the growing threat of Federal naval forces. The northern mouth of the Mississippi had been opened by Grant's capture of Forts Henry and Donelson. This was especially worrying in view of Britain's weakness on the Great Lakes. Equally momentous was the news of the first clash of ironclads at Hampton Roads. Russell wrote “only think of our position if in case of the Yankees turning upon us they should by means of iron ships renew the triumphs they achieved in 1812-13 by means of superior size and weight of metal.”²⁵⁴ In London Adams wrote that it “has been the main talk of town ever since the news came, in parliament, in the clubs, in the city, among the military and naval people. The impression is that it dates the commencement of a new era in warfare, and that Great Britain must consent to begin over again.”²⁵⁵ These threats to the Royal Navy made it all the more important that Britain be spared the drain on its resources necessitated by costly land defences.

It was therefore growing more imperative that the colonies take responsibility for defence on the ground. Britain faced a challenge however over how to bring this acceptance about. Indeed, the Colonial Office had already been frustrated by British North American autonomy restricting their ability to impose measures on the provinces – Monck and

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Newcastle 10886, Newcastle to Monck (copy) private, 12 April 1862, pp. 107-12.

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Palmerston Papers MS, Russell to Palmerston, 31 March 1862.

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Adams, p. 195, 4 April 1862.

Gordon's hands having been tied over their respective militia acts. It was felt therefore that in order to impress this responsibility wider pressure was needed from the mother country, possibly in the form of an act of parliament. Verbose speeches by cabinet ministers were only likely to make the provinces defensive about their obligations, while not possessing the unequivocal firmness of an official directive. In the lower chamber It was worried that endless debate would be taken "practically as a lecture on self defence" and stated that Britain was "not dealing with colonies governed as they used to be; and though it would be well for the War Office and Colonial Office to lay down such principles ... it would be far more satisfactory to the colonies having a free form of government, if the adoption of those principles were the act of the British House of Commons."

This led to a debate in March on the question of the provinces accepting greater responsibility for defence. The previous annual returns in Britain had placed expenditure on the Colonies at about £4,250,000. It was thought about £3,000,000 might be saved by reducing the military commitment currently incumbent upon Britain. The debate especially centred on the perceived injustice that Canada could levy a duty on British imports but still expect military aid. It was asked "the question in the present day was no longer whether Great Britain should tax her Colonies, but to what extent the Colonies should be permitted to tax Great Britain". Particularly given the hardship in Northern England this apparent double standard could not be abided. Therefore Canadians must "undertake the duty of the own defence ... as they were better able to bear taxation than the people of this country." Canada for instance levied a duty of 20 per cent on some of Britain's most important manufactures. Grey stated "I think it is a little too much for the Canadians to take our troops and not to take our goods." The primary objective being for the provinces to take on the defence burden however, the argument was inverted. Thus it was pointed out that "complaints had lately been made of the high import duties levied in Canada ... but ... if the mother country insisted upon larger contributions from Canada towards her military expenses, she could no longer

object to those duties from which the funds must come.”²⁵⁶ This appeared a justifiable basis for understanding, Britain accepting the tariff, Canada paying for local defence. In March therefore the Commons passed a resolution stating that colonies “exercising the rights of self-government ought to undertake the main responsibility of providing for their own internal order and security.

US expansion in the northwest

The wish to increase the security of the provinces was also influenced by the evidence that, as a result of the Civil War, the principles of protectionism and expansionism were being increasingly harnessed in the North. In addition to enabling the passage of the Federal tariff and putting the Reciprocity Treaty at risk, secession had largely removed opposition to expansion in the Northwest. Previously southern congressmen had opposed expansion to the north as likely to enhance the interests of the free-labour states as opposed to the slave. In early 1862 however the rupture in the Union allowed for the passage of the Free Homestead Act and the chartering of the Union Pacific Railroad. This in general concerned the imperial government as a risk to the territorial integrity of British North America. Work on the pacific railroad warned of continued economic strides by the US - and therefore further potential temptation for the provinces to wish admission to the union - particularly as the intercolonial railway scheme was still struggling to get off the ground. Free Homestead made the acquisition of arable land in the northwest an attractive proposition for Northern settlers. The imperial government too was becoming increasingly aware of efforts to impart American culture and institutions into the great north-west. In May Lyons relayed to the Foreign and the Colonial Offices a Congress report which contained unsettling comments on expanding the Union into British territory, particularly into the settlements in the Red River district. One such passage stated that “the Americanization of this important

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section of British America is rapidly progressing. Unless the British parliament acts promptly ... I shall confidently expect a popular movement looking to independence or to annexation to the United States.” Other parts of the report relayed the growing military danger for the provinces. Russell and Newcastle also received the text of an editorial in the *Nor’wester* which argued:

in regard to the Red River settlement ... no portion of the British territory on this continent is so assailable, so certain of occupation by American troops in case of war with England, as Fort Garry and the immense district thence extending along the valley of the Sakatchewan to the Rocky mountains. If our struggle is to be, in the fullest sense, a struggle for national existence, against foreign foes as well as domestic traitors, Minnesota, however remote from the scene of the southern insurrection, will claim the distinction of a winter campaign for the conquest of Central British America.

The imperial government moreover was already receiving petitions from the region’s authority, the Hudson Bay Company, to send troops to these western territories. The British regulars that had been stationed there had been redeployed as part of the reinforcement of Canada made in July 1861. The state of Minnesota had been extremely belligerent about conquering Britain’s western territory and if war came there was evident fear about American success in this theatre and victory overall. On May 1 the company’s proprietor wrote to the Newcastle requesting the installation of a new force to protect the Red River/ Saskatchewan district. He wrote to the Colonial Minister to inform him that contacts in that state believed that “in case of a collision with England, Minnesota is competent to ‘hold, contain and possess’ the valley of Red River to Lake Winnipeg. There are no British troops at Fort Garry, the Canadian rifles whom I saw there in 1859 having turned to Quebec, by way of Hudson

Bay, during the summer just passed.” This request was forwarded to Lewis at the War Office where, owing to how thinly imperial forces were spread and wishing to discourage further dependency on Britain, it was dismissed out of hand. Attempting to press the issue the company then wrote to Newcastle that:

Your Grace is aware that the small body of Canadian Rifles stationed at Red River was withdrawn last year, and I confess that it would lend great comfort to myself and my colleagues if the places of those troops were supplied by a fresh detachment as this would evince a determination on the part of Her Majesty's Government to assist the company in holding the country against foreign invaders, and in maintaining peace and good order among the British inhabitants of the Red River settlement.

The Colonial Office endorsed the policy of withholding imperial forces. Newcastle informed Lewis that “I should drop the correspondence with the company and take no notice of the application for a fresh supply of troops to these remote regions” and added that Monck should be shown the letter.²⁵⁷

Failure of the Canadian militia bill

With the imperial government making clear its policy of reducing the military commitment to the provinces - including the resolution that self-governing provinces should undertake the responsibility for their own security - a committee was set up in Canada to look into the reconstitution of the colonial militia and to conduct a survey on Canadian defences. The first findings were returned on March 15 and reported that nine key positions required permanent defences. It was also urged that a gunboat flotilla should be established on the lakes within the parameters of the Rush-Bagot agreement. In terms of defence on the

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ground the commission reported to the colonial parliament “that a militia force of 50,000 men should be raised and trained, together with a reserve force of the same number.” These recommendations were introduced in a new bill to the Canadian parliament on May 2. Despite the tense climate however legislators were taken aback by the proposals. Creating the desired force would require \$1.1 million dollars. The first year was to cost \$480,000 dollars and involve the calling out of 30,000 men for two weeks of drilling. This was a vast sum considering that the Canadian expenditure at this time amounted to around \$12,000,000 while the revenue stood at \$7,000,000. The Canadian Assembly decided this was too much for a people who had already been subjected to three tax-rises in recent years. Even more alarming was the element calling for compulsory service, especially unacceptable to the French Canadians who in general felt less of an affinity to the mother country.²⁵⁸ Partly as a result of the failed bill, the Canadian administration was given a vote of no confidence and stood down from office, resulting in the infamous double shuffle.

When word reached England that the militia bill had been voted down there was incredulity and admonishment. That the incumbent ministry had fallen because of it caused further consternation. The Colonial Secretary did not mask his disappointment. Newcastle stated “It is deeply to be regretted that the Canadian Parliament should have rejected the Bill which was proposed for their acceptance, or that they should have separated without having passed some efficient measure for the defence of the colony.” The gulf of feeling between the imperial and the provincial government was displayed by the fact that though these measures went further than any defence measure yet proposed in the Canadian ministry, it was nonetheless far below what was hoped for by the Imperial Government. The incoming administration moreover gave no reason for optimism. Monck’s perception of his new assembly was similar to that of Gordon in New Brunswick and derided its parochial nature to Newcastle. The Governor General wrote that “the new ministers are a wretched lot. Not one

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of them is capable of rising above the level of parish politicians, and they are led away by all the small jealousies and suspicions to which minds of that class are prone.”

In addition to the cost and compulsory element of it, part of the reason for the bill's failure went back to that which Head had informed the Colonial Office of the previous year, the view that any military threat would arise from British foreign policy and that therefore it should be imperial forces who deal with it. Within the British parliament's assault on the Canadian ministry therefore this argument was deconstructed. As foreign policy was ultimately the preserve of the sovereign, that sovereign represented and ruled not only Britain, but the whole of the Empire. It was pointed out that “the foreign policy of the Empire, according to the Constitution, did not rest with the people at Home or in any Colony, or in any part of the Empire more than in another; it rested with the Crown, and the Crown was as much resident in Canada as in England.” Semi-autonomous colonies such as Canada had sufficient governmental functions to bring them into conflict with other states. Indeed “The Parliament of Canada had unlimited powers, and might involve them in a war by enacting hostile tariffs. Besides, the circumstances, interests, and position of Canada, were not unlikely to bring war on England on her account.” There was criticism of a Canadian writer in England who had professed the province's loyalty and its appreciation of being part of the empire but held that it was down to ‘imperial’ and not Canadian troops to provide security for it. Attacking the author the speaker stated; “in submitting that proposition, the writer did not see, that if Canada was a part of the empire, Canadian forces ought to constitute part of the forces of the empire. When there was anything to be got out of England, he argued the claims of Canada as a part of the empire; but when invasion was to be resisted by the forces of the empire, England alone was meant.”

Having already passed the resolution that semi-autonomous provinces must provide for their own defence, Canada's failure to do so left the imperial government facing its lack of enforceability. One solution was threatening total abandonment by imperial garrisons unless

they acted. Grey, drawing on his own experience in the role of Colonial Secretary, highlighted that a similar impasse had been reached with the Australians. Grey stated that

when Australia formerly would not listen to the proposal to pay a portion of the expenses of the British troops there, I myself, as Colonial Minister, let it be known that the troops would be immediately ordered to return home. The consequence was that the people of Australia immediately came into the terms first proposed by England; and there could be no doubt, that the embarkation of the first British regiment for the purpose of returning from Canada to England, would make Canada take a very different view on this question.²⁵⁹

A new local force was coming into being in India, and the same principles should be extended to British North America. Grey argued that "it was not for this country to exempt the Canadians from military service. It would be indeed astonishing that the eastern quarter of the empire should maintain an army, but that the western ... leave the centre of the empire to defend it."²⁶⁰

The threats to withdraw imperial troops

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

With ministers now even threatening abandonment of the provinces, Newcastle wrote to Monck suggesting that he should confer with the fellow governors and attempt to devise some co-ordinated measure for defence that could at least be used as propaganda to stem the negative reaction in Britain.²⁶¹ The Governor General of Canada therefore gave a series of speeches attempting to encourage action from the province on defence. These speeches were described as being “distinguished by manly sentiments and moderate language ... telling the Canadians that they must prepare to take some share of their own defence, and that it would be impossible for this country any longer to consent to their contributing nothing, in either purse or person, towards the security of their frontier.”²⁶² Monck told one Canadian audience that they possessed “practical independence ... protected at others’ expense.”²⁶³ The Governor General made clear that this was due to the transformation that was taking place in the United States, a militarily growing and now diplomatically hostile power. At Montreal he stated “The plain truth had better be told and at once recognised ... there is but one quarter from which Canada can apprehend any serious attack; that quarter is the great Republic which lies upon our extended frontier.”

This did inspire some action as under the new ministry a more modest bill was passed, appropriating \$250,000. This, in addition to the force authorized by the Act of 1859, created a ‘sedentary militia’ of 5,000. This limited the total Volunteer force in Canada to 10,000 men. Falling way below the initial bill, let alone the 150,000 men the defence survey had deemed necessary for a defence of the province, this act merely bought on an even more vicious attack in the House of Lords. Many spokesmen picked up on the argument previously advanced by Grey that the colonies should be coerced into providing for defence

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Newcastle to Monck, 5 April 1862.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol 178., Col. 36, 25 July 1862.

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Morton, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857 – 1873*, (Toronto, 1964), p. 115, 3 July.

by a complete withdrawal of imperial troops. Lord Carnarvon - who would in the next government oversee Confederation as Colonial Secretary - gave a powerful speech reprimanding the province for its apparently half-hearted measures. He could

not understand how Canada, when 1,000,000 troops were engaged in a civil war in the country which adjoined her own frontier, and when threats of conquest and annexation were continually thrown out against her, could possibly bring herself to believe that a contingent of 10,000 men was her fair and equitable proportion of the force required for the defence of the territory under the present critical circumstances ... if, indeed, this was her deliberate opinion, it became our serious duty to consider whether it was right to leave the flower of the English army in a position of acknowledged peril in order to defend a country which would not contribute either money or men to its own defence.

It was stated very clearly that the onus should be on the province. If they desired security they must form a strong militia, otherwise the British regulars were completely redundant. Indeed "if they were in peril, then they ought to have raised a larger force for the defence of the province; ... If they were not in peril, then they did not require 10,000 or 12,000 Imperial troops in Canada, whose expense was defrayed by the taxpayers of this country." This left the government with the prospect of facing a debate over whether the imperial forces should be withdrawn altogether, leaving absolutely nothing to oppose an American assault. Indeed, the danger was perceived as so serious that it appeared to warrant Monck being instructed to call the Canadian ministers together and make this proposition clear. Adderley in particular asked whether "Her Majesty's Government did not consider the present an emergency in which they should instruct the Governor to call the Canadian Parliament together ... (as) ... it was worthy of the consideration of the Government whether a considerable body of our troops—including among them the flower of

our army—should be left in Canada without adequate support from the Canadian Militia during a season when the communication between Canada and this country was practically cut off.” He believed Monck should even be so firm with the local legislature as to present a virtual ultimatum and “before the termination of the present season make such arrangements as will afford our troops such support as we have a right to expect for any British force that ought to be left in Canada, or no British force will be imperilled by being left in the colony”.

In such a tense scenario it was declared that the session should not end without a definitive statement laying out imperial policy. Charles Buxton stated that “it was most desirable that Parliament should not separate without some distinct statement being made of the intentions of the Government as to the defence of Canada ... (as) ... it was their right and duty, as it was the right and interest of the Canadians themselves, to know what were the intentions of the Government in view of the possible if not probable danger of invasion to which they were exposed during the approaching winter.” Buxton believed it was time for “putting an end to the undignified and unsatisfactory wrangling between the Secretary of State and the Parliament of Canada, whether by the Canadians increasing their militia force or the Government of England withdrawing the troops from Canada.”²⁶⁴

This threat to end completely British military aid within the provinces moreover foreshadowed the wider and more critical debate over the maintenance of the imperial connection at all. *The Times* for instance stated that “the present appears to us a proper time for plain-speaking about the future relations between England and her more advanced colonies.”²⁶⁵ Indeed, the inadequacy of the measure could not be abided by the Colonial Office, especially if it were causing a mutiny at home over whether to stand shoulder to

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 170, Col. 879, 28 April 1862.

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The Times, 6 June 1862.

shoulder with the province, or even to retain the imperial link. Newcastle told Monck that the Canadian assembly had “succeeded in producing on this side of the water a feeling which two months ago had no existence than in their imaginations and in the clever but eccentric brain of Goldwin Smith.” *The Times* lead editorial on June 6 declared that “the question is not one for Canada of dissolving or maintaining its connection with Great Britain. That it can dissolve almost at pleasure. The question is one of destroying or maintaining its own liberty and independence – of being a self-governing Commonwealth, or a member, or perhaps – as is talked of for the South, a subjugated territory of the United States. The question is much simpler than Canadians think. If they are to be defended at all, they must make up their minds to bear the greater part of the burden of their own defence.”²⁶⁶ The only solution to the present impasse appeared to be concerted action by the provincial authorities. Newcastle wrote “I shall continue to give my earnest exhortation and advice to the Governor General and the people of Canada, both privately and officially, not to rest till some effective measure for the defence of Canada has been passed.”²⁶⁷

Russell's union plan

Canada's parochial approach to the militia question forced a new policy in the Foreign Office, based on the concept that 'greater' political entities bestowed greater responsibility on authorities for their security. Russell wrote that the defeat of the bill meant the need to resurrect the “plan long ago contemplated & then found impracticable, namely that of forming a Federal Union of the British North American Provinces.”²⁶⁸ Thus the Foreign

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The Times, 6 June 1862, lead editorial.

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Ibid.

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Secretary now believed that a more grandiose political idea was required to encourage the provinces to desist in relying on the mother country. According to Russell's plan each side would make concessions, these being intended to address the resentment in England towards the Canadian tariff and increase the defensibility of the province by creating the continental railroad. Britain would accept the import duties - though a "perpetually binding" contract would place a 15 percent limit on them – and the mother country would guarantee the loan for the intercolonial railway. In terms of the political nature of the proposed federation the Foreign Secretary envisaged it as circumventing the militia problems by creating a standing national guard. The provinces would submit to a central legislature while retaining "an Assembly for local purposes", the former paying for the latter, while the new central government would provide a permanent "Federal Force" constituted from regular and militia troops. Crucially the local assemblies would be strictly prohibited from interfering with either defence or the tariff. Thus the two most fundamentally divisive issues in the relationship between Britain and Canada – security and the protective tariff - would be alleviated by this measure. Therefore although during the previous year's inquiries into imperial defence the Colonial Secretary had disassociated himself from the establishment of a federal union - preferring the more 'British' system of a legislative one – Russell now recommended the implementation of a federal system under the pressure of Canadian inaction towards security. Indeed the Foreign Secretary now wrote to Newcastle suggesting that the Imperial Government should "make a public recommendation" to the colonies of "a Federal Union of the British North American Provinces." The strategic upheaval resulting from the Civil War therefore appeared to portend that a change was required in the geopolitical structure of the continent. Indeed, it was hoped that this new nation would offset the emerging military force in the United States. The Spectator, regularly an organ of the Prime Minister, saw union as meaning that "in a few years' time the British American empire might stand alone, and as one great country defy invasion, and preserve the balance of

Russell 31, Russell to Newcastle, copy, confidential, 12 June 1862.

power in the New World.”²⁶⁹ In the Foreign Office this was seen as a means of relinquishing some of Britain’s responsibility and creating a new powerful state, while still keeping the imperial connection intact. Russell stated that “the Federal Province might be constituted in such a manner as to form a loyal constitutional State subject always to the British Crown.”²⁷⁰

Newcastle continued to see union as a step forward for British North America and even a necessary outcome of the Civil War, but still held to the conviction it would be helped by a smaller unification of the Maritime Provinces and completion of the transcontinental railway paving the way. The Colonial secretary wrote on June 22 “I have always been of the opinion that the necessary preliminary to a Legislature Union of the Lower Provinces is an Intercolonial Railway, and that the completion of both these schemes must precede a Union with Canada.”²⁷¹ Newcastle had this ultimate goal in mind and believed the Civil War might accelerate its achievement though continued to believe in the need for the stepping stones. The Colonial Secretary reiterated his sentiments made to the Parliamentary Select Committee the previous spring writing that union “may be hastened by the present condition of the neighbouring country but I do not expect success to any project which attempts it without first *settling* (if not *accomplishing*) both the smaller Union and the Railway.”²⁷² Tellingly however Newcastle conceded that circumstances were so strained as to perhaps justify a measure in the same direction aimed at improving provincial security. To this end the Colonial Secretary advanced again his suggestion to Monck that the provinces attempt to reach some understanding and co-operation on making British North America defensible.

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Spectator, 23 August, 1862, p. 933.

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Ibid.

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Mulgrave to Newcastle, minute by Newcastle, 3 April 1862, CO 217/230.

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CO 217/221, minute by Newcastle, 22 June 1862, fos 251-6.

Speaking of the Foreign Secretary's plan Newcastle wrote that "none of the objections which oppose it seem to impede a union for defence." With this in mind the Colonial Office continued to work on the Intercolonial Railway scheme as this not only promised the logistical benefit in terms of defence but also encouraged this practical co-operation and cohesion between the provinces hitherto lacking. Indeed the Colonial Secretary saw four major advantages to the railway. Not only would it be a step towards ultimate political union and improved defence, it would also create more efficient postal communication and increase inter-provincial trade, all of which by definition would enhance the sense of commonality across British North America. The railway link with the seaboard would make possible the transportation of goods and troops to Canada which currently was "practically cut off from Europe during six months out of the twelve."

In this respect the Colonial Minister's view of the Intercolonial Railway effectively endorsed the recommendations made by Colonel Burgoyne in his report three months earlier. Newcastle considered the economic incentive as vital as the military in reducing longer term financial pressure on the provinces to join the United States. The Colonial Secretary feared the commercial aggressiveness of the northerly United States which threatened to make the "poor & petty Dependencies ... incapable of running the race of competition." The railway might also in future be connected to the US and therefore prevent aggression from developing by forging links between the nations. Newcastle wrote that "a continuous line of Railway through British Territory from Chicago to Halifax would be a most valuable bond of amity between us and them, ensuring 'good behaviour on their part.'" ²⁷³ Moreover the Colonial Secretary recognised that the conflict being fought to the south fundamentally threatened the balance of power of the continent, and saw the Intercolonial as one crucial antidote to it. Newcastle believed that the excessive taxation the Civil War

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imposed would lead to further secession in the West of the US, thus the railway would determine “whether it shall give us over our own territory a free and clear passage across America (and thus in fact around the world) or leave us at the mercy of probably two or three more separate republics, one or other or all of which may often be in hostility to us.” Summing up the desired use for defence Newcastle wrote that “With a railway ... we should wait & watch the turn of events, confident in our power of rapidly and surely reinforcing the troops in Canada in case of necessity.”²⁷⁴

The increasingly apparent revision of the strategic landscape of North America was now feeding more and more into pressure both at home and abroad on the imperial government to intervene on the South’s behalf. Despite the government having previously warded it off out of fears of war with the North, Lindsay bought on the debate over Southern recognition on June 18. The principal arguments put forward to justify recognition were that the Confederacy had established a de facto government and slavery would be assured a more humanitarian demise under a separate South, however underlying these were the more self-interested commercial and strategic benefits separation would give Britain. These were summed up by Lindsay, the MP that had schemed with Napoleon for an intervention in favour of the South. Lindsay desired

to see the Southern States separated from the North because ... it was for the interest of this country, both politically and commercially, that that separation should take place ... the South would be prepared to adopt a free trade policy; that they would be prepared to enter into relations with this country, and to exchange directly their cotton and the other products of the South for our manufactures (and) it would be well for us that a vast power like

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the United States should be divided. We had been constantly receiving threats of war from America; and therefore I am anxious for the separation, because I believe it would be for the political interests of the people of this country.²⁷⁵

Arguments over whether recognition would help protect the colonies or provoke an attack on them were growing in bitterness and complexity. Lindsay argued the former, writing to Russell that “if the question is settled without our recognition of the South, (you) might rest certain that the Northern Armies would be marched into Canada.”²⁷⁶ In the first year of the conflict however it had been made abundantly clear to the Foreign Office that war would result from recognition in any case. With the North’s successes in the first half of 1862 moreover the Foreign Secretary knew the timing for intervention was particularly unfavourable. Russell wrote “in the face of the fluctuating events of the war, the alternations of victory and defeat between allegations so contradictory on the part of the contending Powers, Her Majesty’s Government are still determined to wait.”²⁷⁷ Around this time however military fortunes dramatically shifted as Robert E. Lee began his famous career in the east. Following the months of Northern progress and widespread feeling that the Peninsular Campaign would culminate in the seizure of Richmond, Lee’s audacious counter-offensive reasserted British belief in inevitable Confederate success. Lyons, at home on leave in England, surveying public feeling wrote of the Seven Days that “I’m afraid no one but me is sorry for it.”²⁷⁸ Following this, prematurely believing that the North might now come round to Britain’s opinion that the cause was hopeless a cabinet was held on August 2 to discuss mediation.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 197, Col. 354, 18 June 1862.

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Lindsay to Mason, 18 June 1862.

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Russell to Mason, 2 August 1862.

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Jones, p. 127.

The imperial government still understood however that, due to the threat of war with the Union, they could not proceed until Washington had truly realised that the North could not succeed. Gladstone told Argyll that the cabinet meeting was to determine “to move or not to move in the matter of the American Civil War (but) nothing shall be done until both parties are desirous of it.”²⁷⁹ The imperial government - and Gladstone in particular - however continued to believe that the United States must be broken up. When Argyll replied to Gladstone that, despite McClellan’s withdrawal from the peninsula, the North did not look like succumbing to war-weariness any time soon, the Chancellor replied

I agree that this is not a state of mind favourable to mediation; and I admit it to be a matter of great difficulty to determine when the first step ought to be taken; but I cannot subscribe to the opinion of those who think that Europe is to stand silent without limit of time and witness these horrors and absurdities, which will soon have consumed more men, and done ten times more mischief than the Crimean War... but with the difference that there the result was uncertain, here it is certain in the opinion of the whole world except one of the parties.²⁸⁰

Gladstone was looking for a way to ensure Southern independence. The Chancellor had been entertaining a number of Southerners in England at this time and been reading material on the legal and political nuances of recognising independence movements.²⁸¹ *The Times* concurred with the Chancellor that the North could not perceive the inevitability of separation, positioned as it was in the eye of the storm, and that only mediation would ultimately make it see reason. The paper printed “one word has been in the hearts of men of

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Gladstone to Argyll, 3 August 1862.

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Gladstone to Argyll, 26 August 1862.

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Jones, p. 149.

reason and feeling for some time past, though the passions of the hour in America have prevented it from rising to their lips. That word is "Mediation". That North and South must now choose between separation and ruin, material and political, is the opinion of nearly everyone who, looking impartially and from a distance on the conflict, sees what is hidden from the frenzied eyes of the Northern politicians."²⁸² Britain desired for the Union to agree to separation and the Confederacy's run of victories through the summer in Virginia made it appear possible. Of Jackson's success in the Shenandoah Valley Russell wrote "it really looks as if he might end the war. In October the hour will be ripe for the Cabinet."²⁸³

Preoccupied with the more publicised Eastern theatre of operations, the cumulative effect of the Seven Days, the Valley Campaign and Second Bull Run led British statesmen to contemplate whether the Union would now accept that the war had failed, especially as Lee now looked poised to push the war into the North. The Prime Minister's tone was almost jubilant following the news of the second Confederate victory at Manassas writing to Russell that "the Federals got a very complete smashing ... it seems not altogether unlikely that still greater disasters await them, and that even Washington or Baltimore may fall into the hands of the Confederates. If this should happen, would it not be time for us to consider whether ... England and France might not address the contending parties and recommend an arrangement upon the basis of separation?" With this proposal the Foreign Secretary was in full agreement. Russell replied that if their mediation offer should be refused "we ought ourselves to recognise the Southern States as an independent state."²⁸⁴

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The Times, 5 August 1862.

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Palmerston MS, Russell to Palmerston, 14 September 1862.

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Ibid.

Maritime union, Confederate independence and the continental Balance of Power

In New Brunswick Gordon initiated a plan for maritime union in September, a policy the Governor of Nova Scotia was similarly inclined to. Gordon wrote to the Colonial Secretary "I should like to prepare the way for the union of the colonies the paramount necessity of their future."²⁸⁵ As had been made clear in the discussions over provincial defence Gordon was highly frustrated with the parochialism and 'petty politics' of his local legislature. Following the latest reshuffle the Lieutenant Governor wrote that "every gentleman of education and position has lost seat and has been replaced by some ignorant lumberer or petty attorney, or by some keeper of a village grog shop or grocery store."²⁸⁶ Much like the imperial government's rationale for the wider continental union, confederation of the Maritime Provinces alone would go some way to elevating the status and prestige of the provincial government posts. This was relayed to the Colonial Office, and endorsed by Newcastle who continued to view it as one step towards continent-wide union and emphasised the preference for legislative over a federal structure. The Colonial Secretary replied that "I shall be glad to learn that you have taken all prudent means, without committing the home government beforehand, to bring about a proposal from the lower provinces for a legislative union." Considered as it was the other essential step towards with eventual union, beginning work on the continental railroad was paramount and Gordon, having watched the sleighs carry the troops across his province during the *Trent* Crisis, recognised this in particular. The Colonial Secretary too concurred. Newcastle wrote that the railroad would be a crucial precursor to maritime unification which would then form the perfect basis for a simple merger with Canada. Thus the railway "interlacing them from North to South" would bring the Atlantic colonies into a harmonious state "when thus combined into

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Gordon to Newcastle, Newcastle Papers, 22 November 1862.

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Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation*, (Toronto, 1964), p. 5.

one Province for that more important union with Canada which as a British object ought in my opinion to be always kept in view.”

Strategically, as part of the empire the new unified colony might provide that critical counter to the growing American power to the south. It was believed that as the provinces must ultimately become independent, perhaps sooner than later, Britain must help render them as strong as possible to prevent their absorption by the US. Newcastle wrote “But with the railroad made and the union with the Lower Provinces effected she would become to us a strong & self-reliant Colony so long as her present relationship with the Mother Country continues”, becoming ‘a powerful and independent Ally and a most valuable, I believe an essential, makeweight in the balance of power on the American Continent.” This was the essential object; to ensure the survival of a strong North American nation outside of the American union and that Britain might have a strong ally in the event of war. The Colonial Secretary expanded on it thus: “I cannot imagine an object more clearly marked out for a British Statesman to aim at than to secure the continued separation of Canada and the United States and the eventual foundation of a powerful State out of the disjointed and feeble British North American Provinces ... Indeed no one can fairly judge the question who looks merely to the wants and wishes of the moment and does not look beyond immediate results into the great future of our North American Colonies.”²⁸⁷ Creation of a wider nation would increase the sense of responsibility and Gladstone therefore urged the measure to be adopted, writing “efforts should be made, without delay, to ascertain whether it is practicable to establish a Federation or Political Union of these Colonies.”

With efforts increasing to consolidate a new state in British North America and address the balance of power on the continent, September 1862 also appeared to present the ripest moment to intervene with a view to confirming Southern independence. Britain was becoming aware of Lee’s sortie into Maryland, and it offered the prospect of that ‘decisive’

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clash on Union soil or the capture of Baltimore or the capital predicted by Palmerston. The cabinet therefore effectively decided to let their policy hinge on the outcome of Lee's invasion of Maryland. Palmerston wrote "It is evident that a great conflict is taking place to the North-West of Washington, and its issue must have a great effect on the state of affairs. If the Federals sustain a great defeat they may at once be ready for mediation, and the Iron should be struck while it is hot. If, on the other hand, they should have the best of it, we may wait awhile and see what may follow."²⁸⁸ Any intervention would be predicated on an interruption of the blockade and the resumption of trade with the South. With the fear of retaliation by the Union, it was understood that unless the North was completely convinced of the pointlessness of continuing the war there was no chance of a termination of hostilities to enable mediation. Thus Palmerston asked "... is it likely that the Federals would consent to an armistice to be accompanied by a cessation of Blockades, and which would give the Confederates means of getting all the supplies they may want?"²⁸⁹ Once again, if this Northern acceptance was not present, British policy fell down on the weakness of imperial security. This was because Britain would have to forcibly break the blockade if intervening, an act of war with the North which would provoke an attack on the provinces. Palmerston summed up the difficulty to Clarendon writing "The recognition of the South could be of no benefit to England unless we meant to sweep away the blockade, which would be an act of hostility towards the North."²⁹⁰ Lyons was communicating the same message from Washington writing "foreign intervention, short of the use of force, could only make matters worse here."²⁹¹ Derby stated that he "had been constantly urged to go in for recognition and

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Palmerston to Russell, 30/22/14d, 23 September 1862.

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Palmerston, MS, 3 November 1862.

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Palmerston, MS, Clarendon to Palmerston, 16 October 1862.

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Lyons to Russell, 30/22.36, 11 November 1862

mediation, but had always refused on the ground that recognition would merely irritate the North without advancing the cause of the South or procuring a single bale of cotton.”

Intervention and the security of British North America

W.H Russell wrote in the Army and Navy Gazette “next to the delusion of the North that it can breathe the breath of life into the corpse of the murdered Union again, is the delusion of some people in England who imagine that by recognition we would give life to the South, divide the nations on each side of the black and white line for ever, and bring this war to an end. .. over and above all, recognition, unless it meant ‘war’, would be an aggravation of the horrors of the contest; it would not aid the South one whit, and it would add immensely to the unity and fury of the North.”²⁹² Not only were the government concerned about hostility from the North if they took the lead in intervention however; there also appeared to be a risk if they should refrain and be left behind by the other European powers due to the weakness of Canada. Britain would not only be friendless in North America, but again all the more vulnerable in Europe, particularly if facing a crisis in either continent. It was stated “Suppose Great Britain held aloof completely in the present autumn, while the other Powers of Europe, swayed by the French Government, employed their moral force to terminate the war in Southern independence. In two months Canada might be assailed, and Great Britain be without the least support on that continent.” Conversely the fear of embroilment and particularly the weakness of British North America were only exacerbated by the impression given by France that Britain must be the muscle behind the approach. Indeed, Lyons informed Russell of comments made by the French Minister, writing “In speaking of a plan supposed to be entertained by Russia of joining France in

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offering mediation without England, he said that, independently of other fatal objections, such a mediation would not succeed, because it would want the all-important element of intimidation.” Moreover Lyons conveyed that the French Minister appeared perfectly sanguine about the use of force, writing that Mercier “always takes it as a matter of course that the alternative offered is mediation, or the immediate recognition of the South; and he would not be sorry that fears should be entertained that the rejection of the mediation would be followed by something more in favour of the South than naked recognition.”²⁹³ On September 21 Hammond told Cowley “I do not believe in the honesty of the French in American matters.”

Given this British concern, it was deemed particularly important to bring Russia on board if proceeding with mediation as part of a coalition. This was because American relations with Russia were naturally less fraught because very little trade was conducted between them and there were essentially no areas of interest they would come into conflict over. This involvement was crucial, not only because there could be no question of Russia’s motives coming from anything other than friendship and humanity, but also because Britain felt the added moral weight of a Europe-wide alliance was needed. The Foreign Secretary wrote “my only doubt (was) whether we and France should stir if Russia holds back. Her separation from our move would ensure the rejection of our proposals.”²⁹⁴ The Prime Minister concurred in that. Palmerston wrote that “If the acknowledgement were made at one and the same time by England, France and some other Powers, the Yankee would probably not seek a quarrel with us alone, and would not like one against a European Confederation. Such a quarrel would render certain and permanent that Southern Independence the

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Lyons to Russell, 16 September 1862.

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Russell to Palmerston, 30/22/14d, 23 September 1862.

acknowledgement of which would have caused it”²⁹⁵ It can thus be seen that the primary British concern was avoiding war with the Union, particularly if they were without allies. The imperial Government therefore attempted to cover all bases in terms of averting trouble in North America. Not only would the cabinet make sure it possessed the support of the major European powers but would simultaneously reassert its own neutrality. Russell wrote to Palmerston that “Two things ... must be made clear: (i) that we propose separation... (ii) That we shall take no part in the war unless attacked ourselves.”²⁹⁶ Gladstone had given his infamous speech that Davis had “made a nation” in early October – when the outcome of Lee’s invasion was still unknown in England, and with Russell and the Prime Minister was keen to establish Confederate independence. The Foreign Secretary told the Chancellor therefore that “I am inclined to think that October 16 may be soon enough for a Cabinet, if I am free to communicate the views which Palmerston and I entertain to France and Russia in the interval between this time and the middle of next month.” These ‘views’ were giving “the offer of mediation to both parties in the first place, and in the case of refusal by the North, to recognition of the South. Mediation on the basis of separation and recognition accompanied by a declaration of neutrality.”²⁹⁷ The Foreign Secretary wrote that “Palmerston agrees entirely in this course.”²⁹⁸

The ambiguous results of Antietam however in which despite Federal victory Lee’s army was allowed to retreat unmolested back to Virginia left the mediation plans in limbo. Palmerston wrote “The whole matter is full of difficulty, and can only be cleared up by some

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Palmerston to Russell, 30/22/14D, 2 October 1862.

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Palmerston, MS, 4 October 1862.

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Russell to Gladstone 26 September 1862

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Russell to Cowley 26 September 1862.

more decisive events between the contending parties.”²⁹⁹ The Palmerston, Russell and Gladstone axis too faced strong opposition in the cabinet from those who continued to fear war would be the outcome of recognition. This anti-intervention faction in the Cabinet was led by Lewis. The Secretary of War wrote that it was “Better to endure the ills we have Than fly to others which we know not.”³⁰⁰ In the autumn the wisdom of mediation was also questioned by *The Times* in highlighting that an eruption with the North would cost more than continuing to endure the hardship caused by the blockade. The paper endorsed sentiments of Cobden’s who had criticised intervention as inherently hostile to the North stating: “We quite agree with Mr Cobden that it would be cheaper to keep all Lancashire on turtle and venison than to plunge into a desperate war with the Northern States of America, even with all Europe at our back.” On November 13 following Antietam too Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The announcement did not make Britain less likely to intervene, due to that English belief outlined earlier in the year that emancipation would most likely represent a desperate last resort by the Union that would lead to, rather than abate, a humanitarian crisis. As it applied only to slaves in Confederate controlled regions it was interpreted by the Foreign Office as just such a cynical ploy. Lyons described it to the Foreign Secretary as “a measure of war, and a measure of war of a very questionable kind”, as by only affecting it “makes slavery, at once, legal and illegal, and makes slaves either punishable for running away from their masters, or entitled to be supported and encouraged in doing so, according to the locality of the plantation to which they belong, and the loyalty of the State in which they happen to be.”³⁰¹ After the proclamation Russell’s secretary stated that “we may see re-enacted some of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.”³⁰² The

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Palmerston, MS, Palmerston to Russell 2 October 1862.

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Palmerston, MS, Lewis memorandum, 17 October 1862.

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Lyons to Russell, FO, ‘Correspondence with the United States’, 4 October 1862.

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Emancipation edict came into effect on January 1 1863 and British postulations on intervention persisted until the summer.

The greatest disincentive to act following the aborted invasion of Maryland was the fear of war with the Union given the issues with addressing local security in the provinces. *The Times* wrote “we very much doubt ... whether, if Virginia belonged to France as Canada belongs to England, the Emperor of the French would be so active in beating up for recruits in this American mediation league.” Indeed, until the North had given up the war recognition would invite military disaster in British North America, particularly with the winter approaching, Russell wrote “As regards possible resentment on the part of the Northerns following upon an acknowledgement of the Independence of the South, it is quite true that we should have less to care about that resentment in the spring when communication with Canada was open, and when our naval force could more easily operate upon the American coast, than in winter when we are cut off from Canada and the American coast is not so safe.” Palmerston fully concurred in this on the basis that Canada could not be reinforced for much of the winter, writing to Russell that “I believe you are right in fixing next Spring for the period for the acknowledgement of the Confederate States.”³⁰³ Therefore the cabinet postponed any decision on recognition until the following year when security on the border could be better organised. Agreeing with Palmerston that they could mediate “with less Risk [sic] in the Spring” Russell wrote “it should not take place till May Or June next year, when circumstances may show pretty clearly whether Gladstone was right.”³⁰⁴

The spring and early summer of 1863 witnessed a further critical - and ultimately decisive - period in the crisis of potential imperial intervention. Post Antietam the North had squandered its chance to attack Lee's army in detail and in the ensuing months Confederate

Stuart to Russell, 30/22/36, 7 October 1862.

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Palmerston to Russell, 26 October 1862.

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Palmerston, MS, Palmerston to Russell, 17 December 1862.

forces built up strong momentum again, at least in the more scrutinised eastern theatre. Ironically, the Union's apparent vulnerability, its need to reinvigorate the war effort, and the present strength of the South now caused concern in Britain over security in North America. Federal enlistments were again due to expire and the Federal Government was now preparing to impose the draft. Another measure compromising American freedoms, opposition was expected which might be overcome by exploiting anti-British feeling. Lyons even posited that in their current predicament the North might welcome conflict with Britain as an excuse for failure in the war with the South. He wrote to the Foreign Secretary that:

if no military success be obtained within a short time, it may become a party necessity to resort to some means of producing an excitement in the country sufficient to enable the Government to enforce the Conscription Act, and to exercise the extra-legal powers conferred by the late Congress, To produce such an excitement the more ardent of the party would not hesitate to go, to the verge of a war with England. Nay there are not a few who already declare that if the South must be lost, the best mode to conceal the discomfiture of the party and of the nation, would be to go to war with England and attribute the loss of the South to English interference.³⁰⁵

The further problem with the North's current travails was how this intensified the panic over 'compensation'. With the North having already ploughed immense resources into the war effort, it was considered that having saddled itself with a vast debt and lost the Southern States, the broken remnants of the US would have added incentive to unite themselves commercially and politically with the provinces of British North America. Having from the start believed Southern independence inevitable the compensation fear had long persisted. Now however the strides made by the South industrially and technologically ironically led to

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fears in the opposite direction. Whereas previously the economic and strategic benefits of a separate South had been widely heralded in terms of establishing a new trading partner and potential military ally, now the region's progress threatened to change substantively its future relationship with Britain. The imperial government now faced new problems of a militarily, economically matured Confederacy emerging independent before Palmerston's cabinet extended recognition. This was deemed a particularly issue if Britain continued to procrastinate over recognition, a policy which had already embittered many in the Confederacy. The government was warned in parliament that having had to fight alone for so long, the South was "being driven to be a manufacturing people ... They are making their own guns; and if you keep them much longer in their present condition, they will produce their own cotton and woollen goods. Thus interests will grow up which they will be obliged to protect, and we shall have the protective system introduced into the Southern States of America."³⁰⁶ If in the meantime the South achieved a knockout victory, London's postponement of acknowledging statehood could poison British-Confederate diplomatic relations from their inception. This would not only leave the empire without that valuable alliance on the continent in the event of war with the Union, but also put Britain's Central American possessions at risk from the South, as well as restrict Britain's influence in addressing slavery in the new nation. Thus Addeley argued:

from the moment separation was inevitable, no statesman could be blind to our want of an ally on the other side of the Atlantic. .. if we allow the war to close before we have acknowledged, both the separated Powers being irrevocably hostile to us, we may be forced, now to guard Canada from one, now the West Indies from the other. Our diplomatists, moreover, would have no influence or voice in the Confederacy, whether they attempted to soften the

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resentments which the war had left behind it, to gain legitimate advantages in trade, to deprecate aggressive views, or to improve the situation of the negro.

Another troublesome proposition was put forward. With Lee's devastating victory at Chancellorsville and prospect of another offensive towards Washington, should the capital fall the Union might even be re-established under Southern control. Again, if British-Confederate relations did start on an equitable basis, this would present a dangerous eventuality strategically and politically. Adderley argued that it would leave British interests endangered almost everywhere. Thus "if it were to take place, with their great armies, and with their great navy, and their almost unlimited power, they might offer to drive England out of Canada, France out of Mexico, and whatever nations are interested in them out of the islands of the West Indies; and you might then have a great State built upon slavery and war, instead of that free State to which I look, built up upon an educated people, upon general freedom, and upon morality in government."

In the summer of 1863 the dilemma over recognition remained complex and baffling. With the Army of Northern Virginia on the march, intervention on the South's behalf was now argued to carry with it a concurrent set of risks. One was the fear that it would be perceived in the North that the Confederacy had not been able to establish independence for itself and would therefore give a Federal pretext for future renewal of the conflict. It was suggested therefore that intervention "would take from the South all the weight, the stability, the security which they would enjoy, if they achieved their statehood alone. The Federal States would always feel that the South had not been able to gain freedom for itself, and might therefore be again re-conquered whenever a fitting opportunity offered itself." Indeed it seemed premature to act just when the Confederacy was on the brink of finally proving itself fit for independence. Surveying the decisions about to be reached in Pennsylvania and at Vicksburg, Gladstone stated on June 30 that "certainly there has not been a single epoch

during the whole period of the war, which has now been raging for more than two years, at which there were pending military issues of such vast moment, both in the east and the west —issues so important with reference to the future position and interests of either or both belligerents.” Gladstone did appreciate the progress made by the Federals in the Western theatre and that balanced against Confederate feats of arms in the east mediation would be practically very difficult. Continuing to be certain of Confederate independence the Chancellor did “not say that the main result of this contest is ..., in any degree doubtful” however “during an armistice the two parties keep their arms in their hands; how could they define the limits within which those parties should confine themselves? The limits now were most uncertain; the north held New Orleans and the Mississippi; the South held parts of Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland.”³⁰⁷

Summary

Since the Trent Affair the British government had been increasingly concerned by the progress of the Civil War. Wishing for it to cease and the Confederacy to become independent, the North's military success during the first half of the year came as a setback. When the South had managed to reverse the tide and had appeared ready to win a major victory on Northern soil the conflict again degenerated into an uncertain stalemate. It had continually dissuaded Britain from intervening as until the North could see that its cause was hopeless, British interference meant war and probable catastrophe in British North America. This in turn had caused issues with Anglo-French co-operation as Napoleon was far more headstrong to act and France had made clear it believed Britain to be the key intimidating factor in the initiative. This left the British government wary of a split with France when facing a crisis either in North America or Europe or both.

Of equal concern was that over this period the Union's armed forces had grown exponentially from the tiny regular US army before the war. This was also true, and perhaps

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more worrying, regarding the growing US navy. Britain was forced to note both the victories it had won on the inland waters of the continent and the growing efficiency of the blockade. These factors had proven still more alarming over the previous year due to the evidence of a renewed drive by the US towards westward and northward expansion - unshackled as it now was of the more conservative South. Moreover there remained a critical lack of action in the provinces towards border defence. The failure of the militia bill in Canada was the signal issue, and from it a fierce political debate had begun on how to impress on the North American colonies that it was their responsibility to address local security. This had led to talk of either legislating to force the provinces to adopt measures, or simply abandoning them by withdrawing imperial troops. The only real initiative the British government had taken was in supporting the union scheme, believed as it was to be a means of increasing the sense of responsibility of the colonial politicians for their country's defence, and attempting to bring the continental railway about. This effort to address security in the provinces would increase between 1863 and 1864. Even though Britain's movement towards intervention receded to a neutral stance, the intensifying nature of the Civil War made maintenance of that neutrality correspondingly difficult, both at sea and along the British North American border.

CHAPTER 6

THE NEUTRALITY CRISIS, 1863-64

As the Civil War progressed the problems with maintaining neutrality made diplomacy increasingly difficult with the US and added to the sense of insecurity over British North America. Deeper into the war moreover these issues with greater regularity sprung from the provinces themselves. Early in 1863 friction was caused with the seizure of numerous vessels accused of violating, or attempting to violate, the blockade. In many cases ships en route to or from Matamoros - a neutral Mexican port - were detained under the principle of 'continuous voyage'. This was the principle that the ships in question, while entitled to transport their cargo to such neutral ports, contained goods or contraband that would be forwarded to the Confederacy. One vessel seized by the Union in particular, the *Peterhoff*, caused a serious backlash in Britain. *The Times* was singularly belligerent, stating that "there are limits to the forbearance which even a great nation can exercise towards a struggling but still petulant and presuming Government. In the case of the *Peterhoff* these limits have been passed."³⁰⁸ This belligerence in the press was not replicated in government as controversies over British neutrality through the middle years of the Civil War increasingly led the cabinet to worry about imperial security. The contracting of English shipbuilders to

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The Times, 2 April, 1863.

produce vessels for the Confederate war at sea bought British-American relations close to breaking point. Of these the Alabama with its record of destruction of Northern commerce was most famous. The economic effect on the eastern seaboard states resulted in threats of Northern privateers being sent out against British shipping. Lyons was told that the New York Chamber of Commerce had protested that because of the ships fitted out in England “no American merchant vessels would get freights – that even war with England was preferable to this – that in that case the maritime enterprise of the country would at least find a profitable employment in cruising against British trade.” Predictably the issue again spawned suggestions that ‘mob’ rule or the Department of State or both would resort to war with Britain. Lyons received a letter from Seward on March 8 stating “I am receiving daily such representations from our sea-ports concerning the depredations on our commerce committed by the vessels built and practically fitted out in England, that I do most sincerely apprehend a new element is entering into the unhappy condition of our affairs, which, with all the best dispositions of your Government and my own, cannot long be controlled to the preservation of peace.”³⁰⁹

Lyons speculated that the Secretary of State was again using uncompromising diplomacy in order to curry favour with the hardliners. He wrote to Russell that “It looks like a return to the old bluster. Whether he does it to recover his position with the Radical party and with the people at large ... or.... he really thinks he can frighten England and France with his privateers, I can not say.”³¹⁰ Unnervingly however, if Seward’s comments were in earnest it was a startling admission of that which Britain perceived, that the various lobbyists and interest groups or ‘mob’ at work in Washington, “cannot long be controlled.” Ironically after two years of fearing Seward too powerful in Washington, Britain had now come to rue the fact that the Secretary of State’s voice might not carry sufficient weight in the Federal

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Lyons to Russell, 10 March 1863, FO Am. Vol. 147,.

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Lyons to Russell, 24 February 1863, Pro 30/22/37, ff. 29-30.

cabinet. Lyons told the Foreign Office that Seward “is not as much listened to as he ought to be by his colleagues in the War and Navy Departments.”³¹¹ Indeed, the British Minister exhibited concern at the influence of the chiefs of these military branches who, especially given the general growth and enhancement of Federal arms, could not but become more powerful in their roles. The fear had grown that politicians in the White House could now not control the military juggernaut they had created, or that this immersion in power would make them headstrong. The strides made by the Federal Navy in particular added a new dimension to the diplomatic problems Britain felt with the North. This now bred a confidence amongst belligerent Northern authorities that the US could compete with British power at sea. Lyons wrote: “a good deal of allowance must be made for the evident design of the Government and indeed of the people to intimidate England, but there can be little doubt that the exasperation has reached such a point as to constitute serious danger. It is fully shared by many important members of the Cabinet – nor are the men in high office exempt from the overweening idea of the naval power of the United States, which reconciles the people to the notion of a war with England.”³¹²

The British Minister reported to Russell that he was as much as if not more afraid of the “vexatious proceedings” of the United States Navy Department than the illegal shipbuilding practices in England benefitting the Confederacy.³¹³ Lyons however, deeply concerned about an American attack on British North America, urged Russell not to allow the shipbuilding controversy to be used as justification and do all in his power to stop further Confederate purchases without conveying the impression he had been intimidated by the Union. He wrote to Russell “I would rather the quarrel came, if come it must, upon some better ground for us than this question of the ships fitted out for the Confederates. The great

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Lyons to Russell, 9 May 1864.

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Lyons to Russell, 14 April 1863.

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Lyons Papers, 23 April, 1863.

point to be gained in my opinion, would be to prevent the ships sailing, without leading the people here to think that they had gained their point by threats.”³¹⁴ The next day Lyons ciphered Monck in Canada to warn him about trouble brewing with the US. Russell concurred with Lyons’s view of the danger. Russell wrote “we must be neutral ... We do not ‘fit out ships by the dozen,’ and Mr. S must know the allegation to be untrue. One-two-three ships may have evaded our laws, just as the Americans evaded the American laws during the Canadian Contest.” Following this however, the imperial government tightened up its monitoring of suspected infringements. The Foreign Secretary wrote to Lyons that “The orders given to watch, and stop when evidence can be procured, vessels apparently intended for the Confederate service will, it is to be hoped, allay the strong feelings which have been raised in Northern America by the escape from justice of the *Oreto* and *Alabama*.”³¹⁵ The Governor General of Canada already appreciated that relations were becoming more fraught, as at this time the American Ship Company requested that Canadian engineers in US territory swear an oath of allegiance to the United States or they would have their licenses revoked. In retaliation the imperial authorities made American engineers working for the Canadian Board of Railway Commissioners do likewise.³¹⁶

Legislating on, or withdrawing from, the Colonies

When the War Secretary came to announce the Army Estimates in 1863, an intensive debate ensued over the burden of defence in North America and particularly the commitment to Canada. Having resolved to reduce colonial military expenditure measures were advocated to spare the imperial government the current costs. There were calls for the

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Lyons to Russell, 13 April 1863.

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Russell to Lyons, FO Am. Vol. 869 No. 158, 19 April 1863.

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Winks, p. 44.

colonies to pay for the 'commissariat expenditure' of stationing imperial troops in their territory. This all came back to legislating on the responsibility for defence. One concern however was that if colonial assemblies were so contributing that they would expect, and really be entitled, to have a direct say with what was done with those forces. Roebuck, using the topical argument of the Canadian legislature, argued that:

if they asked the Colonies to provide any portion of what was required for the movement of the army in the Colonies, they gave to the Colonies a voice in the management of the army ... Supposing (Britain) had two regiments at Quebec and wanted to move them to Toronto, they being partly paid by the colonial Government, it might object to that removal, and the management would in fact pass out of the Imperial Government's hands; and if they put any portion of the management in colonial hands, they destroyed the home management.³¹⁷

Conversely if the present state of affairs persisted and Britain continued to bankroll the imperial forces in Canada it might cause friction with other colonies, particularly Australia and New Zealand, who already made contributions to their own security. Therefore "if Canada, which was older than they were, was allowed to rely on the parent State, other Colonies would complain with reason of the injustice of putting them on a different footing." Canada's inaction was also apt, and dangerously so, to turn English popular opinion against the colony and by association perhaps against the maintenance of an empire as a whole if an attack on the provinces dragged Britain into a costly war with the newly militarised United States. Roebuck argued that "at present public opinion was, generally speaking, in favour of the connection with the Colonies; but if war were to break out with the United States, it would not be war on a small scale. It would become necessary to increase the burdens of this country in order to defend Canada against invasion; and the effect upon public opinion would

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be disastrous, and might prove unfavourable to a continuance of our connection with Canada, and afterwards even with other Colonies.”

The War Minister narrowed in on the essence of the choices facing Britain succinctly and starkly. These were either passing an Act of Parliament in order to levy contributions from the colonies as a form of taxation, or to simply reduce the forces stationed there. Lewis stated that “there were only two practical courses open to the House and the Government with respect to the diminution of colonial military expenses. One was for the House to legislate on the subject, which would be departing from the rule religiously observed since the American War; the other was to withdraw our troops from the Colonies.” One method was a regression from the granting of responsible government, the other was an abandonment of the provinces at an hour of need. Therefore each was likely to significantly damage the relationship between the mother-country and the colonies. The Secretary of War’s stark comments struck a significant chord however due to the dangerous ‘halfway house’ Britain seemed to be occupying. This middle-ground was the maintenance of a force in the colonies large enough to cause complacency by the locals towards defence; yet woefully insufficient to resist American attack, particularly given the vast increase in Federal forces. Thus “It was evident that great standing armies and navies would henceforth become habitual to North America, as they had hitherto been to Europe. It seemed a short-sighted proceeding to take a half-and-half policy with respect to the defence of the Colonies, and to throw small bodies of troops into them merely as objects for attack.” This piecemeal scattering of imperial forces in as vulnerable a region as North America was described as ‘dandling’ the colonies. Some in the Commons therefore called for “the question of withdrawing our troops ought to be raised distinctly, and a Vote taken upon it.”

The US Minister’s “This is War” comment

With this unresolved however, relations further deteriorated with the Union when British neutrality came under renewed attack from the Federal Government. Anglo-American diplomacy appeared close to breaking point when new iron-plated vessels built for Confederate use were not intercepted by the government, despite warnings from the US minister that this was their intended purpose. Having taken advice from the law officers of the crown the British government determined that without clear evidence that they had been purchased as Confederate warships the vessels could not be confiscated nor the contractors arrested. Rebuking Adams's pressure to summarily seize the vessels the Queen's solicitor general stated "laws are usually enforced against British subjects on evidence, and not on suspicion; on facts, and not on presumption; on satisfactory testimony, and not on the mere accusation of a foreign minister or his agents." The Foreign Secretary received a note however from Adams stating that "at this moment, when one of the ironclad war vessels is on the point of departure... I trust I need not express how profound is my regret at the conclusion to which Her Majesty's Government have arrived. I can regard it not other wise than as practically opening to the insurgents full liberty in this kingdom ... It would be superfluous in me to point out to your Lordship that this is war."³¹⁸

Palmerston was again occupied by the threat of conflict with the US. The Prime Minister complained to Adams of these sentiments which "So plainly and repeatedly imply an intimation of hostile proceeding toward Great Britain on the part of ... the United States unless steps are taken by Her Majesty's government which the law does not authorize, or unless the law which you consider as insufficient is altered." Federal pressure continued to mount however, increasing diplomatic tension. Adams told Russell that British neutrality was "nothing more than a shadow under which war may be conducted." Reiterating the legal complications with seizing suspected Confederate-bound vessels, the Foreign Secretary

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replied that Britain could not “admit assertions for proof, nor conjecture for certainty.”³¹⁹ Palmerston having advocated tough diplomacy and use of deterrence throughout the Civil War continued to believe that standing up to American threats was the only option. The Prime Minister wrote that he would “not be induced by any consideration, either to overstep the limits of the law or to propose to Parliament any new law” and that he would not “shrink from any consequences of such a decision.”³²⁰ Understanding that Northern resentment continued to stem from giving the Confederacy belligerent status, the Foreign Secretary too proposed taking a hard-line. Russell suggested to Lyons that the European Powers threaten to withdraw the North’s belligerent rights unless the Union recognised those of the South. Again however the issue was the aversion to having to use force. Lyons wrote that

such a declaration might produce a furious outburst of wrath from Government and public here ... then England, France and Spain must be really firm, and not allow their Declaration to be a *brutum fulmen*. If on its being met, as it very probably would be, by a decided refusal on the part of the United States, they did not proceed to break up the Blockade, or at all events to resist by force the exercise of the right of visit on the high seas, the United States Government and people would become more difficult to deal with than ever.”³²¹

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Russell to Adams, 11 September 1863.

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Palmerston to Russell, 10 September 1863.

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Lyons to Russell, 26 October 1863.

Lyons then reiterated to Russell the problem of US readiness in case of diplomacy failing, writing “I don’t think the Government here at all desires to pick a quarrel with us or with any European Power – but the better prepared it is, the less manageable it will be.” British discomfort continued to be particularly exacerbated by the growing strength of Federal military forces and the British Minister could witness the Union’s new power at first hand. Lyons told Russell “I doubt whether people in Europe are aware of the extent of the progress of this country in military strength” and stated that a Federal invasion, given the five to one advantage it would probably enjoy, could “not be repelled.”³²² It was not only the Union’s mammoth forces on land, but their burgeoning iron-cased fleet that worried British military-men now. Indeed Britain’s shortfall was critical if during the next campaigning season the North was free of the rebellion and able to turn on Britain. Somerset wrote to Palmerston “in case the Feds should be disposed and able next year to execute their threatened vengeance ... we are short of iron clads and it takes time to build them.”³²³ With all this in mind, the Foreign Secretary now begun to show the strain of the constant bartering between Britain and the States writing “I am more and more persuaded that amongst the Powers with whose Ministers I pass my time there is none with whom our relations ought to be so frank and cordial as the United States.”³²⁴

The Chesapeake affair and reviving the union scheme

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Lyons to Russell, Fo 5/896, f. 23, 3 November 1863.

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Palmerston to Somerset, Somerset RO Somerset MSS, d/RA/A/2a/39/11, 13 September 1863.

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Russell to Lyons, Lyons papers, 21 November 1863.

These relations again became critical when a Union ship was hijacked by Confederates in Chesapeake Bay and then taken to Halifax harbour. The incident emphasised again the risk the imperial connection bought. When Doyle asked the head of the Nova Scotia assembly Charles Tupper what his response was to be if the Northern captain refused to cooperate the British commander was told “in that case, you must sink his vessels from the batteries.”³²⁵ The Chesapeake Affair appeared the most dangerous threat to British-American peace since the *Trent* crisis. As it had done up to now the imperial government maintained its policy of attempting to show strength and resolve in order to deter the US from any precipitate action. Lyons wrote that “I don’t think it would be prudent to pass over it lightly, because if we give the United States Junior Officers an inch in such matters, they will be apt to go to such lengths, to force us into a quarrel at last. I should be very loathe to make any specific demand without instruction.”³²⁶

Seward too wrote to the British Minister warning of the dangers of continued Southern support coming from the provinces. The Secretary of State told Lyons that the present state of affairs “must bring on border collisions and war between her Majesty’s colonies and the United States.”³²⁷ Ironically given British efforts early in the Civil War to impress upon Seward that he must not communicate directly with the provinces Monck now, realising the severity of the issues, started his own direct dialogue with the Secretary of State in November. Edward Cardwell succeeded the very ill Duke of Newcastle as Colonial Secretary in April 1864 and in the wake of the Chesapeake Affair carried on the work Newcastle had been engaged in of bringing about the intercolonial railway. Similarly given

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Winks, p. 251.

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Lyons to Russell, 31 December 1863.

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Seward to Lyons 23 January 1864.

the security concerns, early in the year the Canadian assembly too had begun to make their own efforts to revive the railway scheme. Cardwell stated "Rather than risk the loss of another year the Canadian government is about to proceed with the survey of the line of the Intercolonial Railway at its sole cost."³²⁸ Throughout late 1863 to early 1864 allegations of breaches of neutrality cast a shadow in the minds of the Federal Government and made war appear a constant possibility. Speaking about blockade running and the fitting out of Confederate ships Adams told Russell that the "duty of self defence, against such a policy of disguised hostility, becomes imperative."³²⁹ The cumulative tension over these issues was so severe that Lyons told Russell on May 23 that "I am out of heart altogether."

The Atlantic colonies now revived the scheme advanced by Gordon and Newcastle in 1862 of entering into maritime union, hoping close political co-operation could help formulate solutions to their financial problems. The leaders of the provincial assemblies sent requests to their respective lieutenant governors to hold a conference on the subject of union. When the proposal was relayed to Cardwell he rapidly instructed the governors to endorse the meeting, scheduled for September in Charlottetown. At this time however further political turmoil in Canada with neither conservatives nor liberals able to command a viable majority cabinet led to a coalition government pledged to achieve political reform. Their policy was the establishment of a wider political union in order to end the continual political stalemate created by the equal legislative representation of Upper and Lower Canada, either by entering into a general union with the other British provinces, or failing this, by 'applying the federal principle' to the two Canadas alone. As a result the Canadian coalition requested permission to send delegates to the Charlottetown Conference and propose terms for the larger union of British North America.

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Creighton, p. 30.

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Adams to Russell, fo 5/1149, 25 January 1864.

This was extremely welcome news for the imperial government, it having been repeatedly advanced through the Civil War that the new political system was necessary to keep the provinces secure from the US. Monck enthusiastically sanctioned the plan and notified Cardwell who wrote “I have no objection whatever to an union of the whole of British North America in one great & important province: and I do not anticipate that the Cabinet, or Parliament, will have any.”³³⁰ Cardwell’s immediate endorsement of this “great and important” union stood in contrast to his predecessor’s belief in the building blocks of the intercolonial railway and maritime union coming first and indicated the imperial government’s readiness to accelerate the process. This was a manifestation of believing a ‘greater’ nation bestowed increased responsibility for managing colonial security. Indeed Gladstone reemphasised the argument that the acceptance of self-government by colonies had to correspond to the acceptance of responsibility for self-defence, and therefore union was a vital measure. The Chancellor wrote of the provinces that “nothing can defend them except the desperate energy of a brave, self-relying population, which fights for hearth and home” and therefore British North America should be “detached, as to their defensive not less than their administrative responsibilities from England.”³³¹ Gladstone thus saw an early continent-wide union as a means to devolve the onus for defence on the provinces writing that the aim was to “shift the centre of responsibility” and that the colonies must grow out of “the sentiment and habit of mere dependencies” and gain a “corporate and common feeling.” Richard Graves MacDonnell took over as Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia in June, under instructions that he was to advance the union scheme.

Indeed, in a more long term, far-reaching sense the intended benefit of union was to address the regional balance of power, currently so uncertain given the vast conflict across the United States. According to Adderley “the reason why the North American Provinces

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Cardwell to Monck, 16 July 1864.

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 62.

were at present a weakness to England was that they had been prevented from properly developing their own resources”, however if through union “the whole strength of Canada was drawn out and organized, instead of being an embarrassment and a source of weakness and anxiety at such a moment as this, she would add tenfold to the strength of this country.”³³² Indeed, as the US was now emerging as a rival naval power it was more pressing than ever to consolidate the possession of the valuable naval bases and resources of the Atlantic Provinces, and the St Lawrence River. Conversely, if British North America fell to a victorious North, dominant and secure across the whole continent, the strength of the US army would become virtually redundant – except in conjunction with a powerful navy. Adderley stated that; “it was the interest of England to maintain the North American Provinces as an independent Power ... England was a great maritime nation, and in that quarter of the world would gain a great accession of strength by an alliance with the Maritime Provinces of North America, which we ought not to allow to accrue to the United States.”

The intention therefore was the development of a great, friendly, quasi-independent state to help keep in check Federal power in the region and beyond. Allegiance to this greater North continental nation would instil a wider sense of community, importance and pride in British North America. Not only would this increased sense of national status make the people more committed to its protection, but the greater the dissociation with Britain, in theory the less hostility would be felt to and from the United States. Thus Gladstone believed that “the true aim of all our measures at this important juncture should be to bring the people of the North American colonies, regarded in one mass, as nearly to a national sentiment and position as their relation to the British Crown will permit.”

The St Albans raid and the responsibility for defence

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Lyons knew in the build up to the presidential contest that the North would again play on anti-British feeling, writing to Russell that “we must be prepared for demonstrations of a ‘spirited foreign policy’ by Mr. Seward during the next fortnight, for electioneering purposes.”³³³ Lincoln’s re-election confirmed that the war would be prosecuted vigorously until a victorious Federal conclusion. In the interim however further crises with the North occurred which gave rise to fears beyond Seward’s ‘spirited foreign policy’, and which added to the urgency of addressing continental union and security at the planned conference on confederation. Indeed, mid-way through the proceedings at Charlottetown the most serious security crisis for the provinces since the *Trent* affair occurred, when Confederate raiders used Canada as a base for launching an attack on the banks of St Albans, Vermont. Their main goal, to provoke an armed American response into British North America and therefore drag Britain into the war against the North, initially showed signs of succeeding. The Federal Commander called to the town, General Dix, had ordered his troops to pursue the raiders across the border into Canada if necessary. *The Times* called General Dix’s order “a declaration of war against Canada.”³³⁴ Monck wrote to Lyons concerned that the orders apparently issued by General Dix had “appeared uncontradicted in the public papers and contains express orders on the part of an official of the U.S for the entry of the troops of that power upon the territory of Her Majesty.” Monck therefore urged that the political and army chiefs in the US attempt to seize control of the situation, writing to Lyons “I’m sure Mr. Seward will ... see that it is necessary in order for the maintenance of these amicable relations that no act should be done by any civil or military officer of the U.S which might bear the construction of ... an infraction of the rights of Her Majesty or a violation of the soil of Her dominions and he will believe that this remonstrance is made in no unfriendly spirit

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Lyons to Russell, Russell papers, 24 October 1864.

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The Times, 29 December 1864.

and is prompted by a sincere desire to prevent any just cause of complaint between the countries.”

The Governor General therefore believed it his duty to ask Lyons to “bring the subject under the notice of the Secretary of State of the U.S with the view that the order may be disavowed or explained.”³³⁵ Lyons passed on to this request to Seward; however the Secretary of State’s first letter however was simply a request for the suspects to be extradited for trial in Vermont. Believing in ‘mobocratic’ rule, again the imperial government feared the general belligerent feeling in the public and press would make it impossible for Washington to maintain peace. The concern was sustained by Seward’s own comments and further reports from Monck in Canada. Lyons informed the Foreign Office that the Secretary of State himself had alluded to this potential inability to restrain popular feeling, writing that Seward “said it would be impossible to resist the pressure which would be put upon the government ... if these incursions from Canada continued.”³³⁶ The Canadian Governor General too communicated to Lyons an extract from the *New York Post* which stated that “either the Canadian authorities should be called on to send the rebels, who are getting up predatory enterprise against us, out of Canada, or we should have armed forces on the frontier ready to take summary vengeance on these marauders, and for that purpose to follow them, as we have a right to do, across the lines, if the pursuit is instant.” This danger was temporarily diffused when the Federal Government officially countermanded the order.

The administrative powers possessed by the British colonies however continued to risk drawing Britain into war with the US. Following a hearing in December a Canadian court ruled that the Vermont raiders be freed. Pro-Confederate feeling in the province had helped harbour the guerrillas and was potentially serving to protect them. Lyons stated that the affair was perpetrated not by British North Americans but by “rebels, secessionists, of whom there

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Monck to Lyons, 5 November 1864.

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Lyons to Russell, Pro 30/22/38, f. 120, 28 October 1864.

are great numbers in Halifax.”³³⁷ Seward had written that if the raiders were released Lyons could expect “spirited, hasty, popular proceedings for self-defence and retaliation.”³³⁸ Monck was panicked by the prospect that the US would have no choice but to seek redress themselves. The depth of Monck’s concern was displayed in the memoir of his wife on December 13, a night when the Governor General was entertaining key figures in the Canadian ministry. Lady Monck wrote that “When the dinner was nearly over, the G.G was mysteriously called out.” On taking his leave Monck said sorrowfully “I suppose this is an invasion of the Yankees.” It turned out to be a false alarm and Monck urged Burnley, who had stepped in as British Minister in Washington in the absence of Lyons, to attempt to conciliate Seward. Monck wrote to Burnley of the court’s decision on “grounds so absurd that I cannot account for it” and to “convey my annoyance at what has happened with reference to the Vermont raiders; and inform him that I shall do everything I can to remedy the effect of Judge Coursol’s proceedings.”³³⁹ This increased the feeling of iniquity in Britain, in the sense that the provinces exercised the power of the law, yet refused to exercise the power of national defence.

In the aftermath of the St Albans raid furthermore the policies adopted by the Federal government suggested a genuine threat to British North America. Alarming Lyons was notified that due to the tension caused by Confederate activities in Canada the United States was temporarily placing armed vessels on the lakes, thus abrogating the Rush-Bagot agreement. Derby questioned the Foreign Secretary over the issue stating that “they have, in violation of the treaty, placed a force upon the Lakes, which menace the security of Canada, and they have not given, so far as I am aware, any reasons which might seem to render necessary the infraction of the solemn conditions of the treaty.” Russell had to respond that

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Winks, p. 175.

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Lyons to Russell, 21 November 1864.

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Monck to Burnley, 14 December 1864.

the measure was “temporary” and “justified” to provide security given the trouble emanating from the St Albans and Chesapeake affairs, and the seizure of United States vessels on Lake Erie.³⁴⁰ Further indication of hostility came with Lincoln’s directive on December 17 that passports be required on entering the US. As with the placing of vessels on the lakes, Britain’s acquiescence in the measure for the sake of security helped to placate the Union. Russell said of the measure that “if the effect should be to check the Canadian tendency to favour the insurgents, there would be little harm in that.” Shortly after Russell had a note forwarded to Seward that he had addressed to Mason and Slidell in London, stating that Confederate activity in British North America must cease, and suggested it be forwarded from Washington to Lee and Stephens in Virginia. Monck’s strong line in condemning the raid and the British North Americans who protected them also helped smooth diplomacy Seward thanking Burnley for “Lord Monck’s extremely energetic and conciliatory policy.”³⁴¹

In the provinces themselves at least St Albans had something of a galvanising effect. Southerners had selected Canada for its proximity to the Northern States and had been assisted by Confederate sympathisers therein. In previous crises, whether by transporting Confederate emissaries across the channel or by allowing ships to be fitted for Southern use in English ports, the colonies could ascribe the danger to British actions. In the present affair the imperial government had played no role. The provinces therefore could not continue to claim that military threat would arise solely from British policy and dismiss it as Britain’s responsibility to deal with.³⁴² This had a direct bearing on the resolutions of the conference pertaining to colonial defence. Encouraged by the progress made at Charlottetown, a second conference was scheduled to be held in October at Quebec. From this meeting came the 72 resolutions, later called the ‘Quebec Scheme’, which ultimately came to form

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Hansard, CLXXXV, col. 428.

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Burnley to Russell, Russell papers, 27 December 1864

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Ibid., p. 217.

the basis of British North American confederation. One of these resolutions explicitly stated that following confederation local security would be provided by the new central government. This was Article no. 67 reading "All engagements that may before the Union be entered into with the Imperial Government for the defence of the Country shall be assumed by the General Government."³⁴³ Key to Britain's acceptance of the plan was this shift in the burden of defence. Of the Quebec Scheme Monck wrote "the advantages whether looked at from the point of view of administration, commerce or defence appear to me so obvious that it would be a waste of time to state them."³⁴⁴ Taking his lead from notes made on the scheme by Monck, Cardwell had only two relatively minor quibbles with the scheme's 72 resolutions. One was with who would rest the right of pardon, Cardwell preferring to maintain the imperial prerogative by having it vested in the Governor-General. The other was the potential stalemate that could occur in the proposed Legislative Council, based as it would be on fixed numbers and life membership - this type of deadlock in the existing Canadian parliament being one of the major reasons necessitating change.

Legislative Union and Security

The more general imperial reservation however remained the preference for strong legislative union over the derided 'mobocratic' federal structure now put forward. The Civil War offered Britain a stark warning against a system that left too much power and impetus in the hands of local, regional bodies.³⁴⁵ More importantly the security dilemmas bought on by the conflict in the United States rendered this element critical. The imperial government supported confederation as a means of relieving itself of its own commitments on the continent - particularly in shedding its obligations on defence - therefore the newly

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CO 880, vol. 15, The Quebec Resolutions, Monck to Cardwell, 7 November, 1864.

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Monck to Cardwell, 7 November 1864.

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Martin, p. 148.

constructed central government had to be sufficiently strong and unitary to protect the whole. From Britain's perspective therefore the federal system threatened to compromise one of the main rationales for unification. MacDonnell in Nova Scotia expressed the fear that in this loose decentralised state while still under the imperial umbrella, the new federation would remain a burden and a danger to Britain. The combination of weak provincial authority coupled with the connection to Britain would tempt American attack and necessitate huge imperial military resources. MacDonnell wrote that the proposed system of government came "with a similar complicated system of checks and counter-checks, the whole being just sufficiently linked by the Governor-General to Great Britain to invite aggression from without and justify demands on resources from the latter."³⁴⁶

Furthermore this negated the great hope that confederation would turn in Britain's favour the balance of power on the continent. Indeed, for MacDonnell the federal structure doomed the possibility that British North America might found a nation as illustrious and powerful as the mother country. The Lieutenant Governor wrote

As one who had been sanguine enough to look for the creation of sufficient mutual confidence and the display of sufficient self-sacrificing spirit amongst the statesmen of these Provinces on which to found in America a real 'New Britain of the West', I am sorely disappointed at learning that so pleasing a hope has ended in a proposal to establish a mere Confederation of States, with every local demarcation strictly preserved, with petty Governors and Legislatures almost on the model of the neighbouring Republic, and unavoidably containing similar elements of discord and dispute as to State and Federal rights.³⁴⁷

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Ibid.

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CO 880, vol. 15, MacDonnell to Cardwell, 21 November 1864.

Gordon too, remaining highly critical of the parochial nature of his provincial assembly members, wrote lengthy dispatches to Cardwell criticising the scheme's adoption of the federal principle over the infinitely more sound foundation of a legislative union.³⁴⁸ Gordon suggested that Britain should reject the Quebec Scheme and instead bestow all power in a new central authority over the provinces' heads. Gordon told Cardwell that "if the British North American Provinces were united by Act of Parliament, or by Royal Charter, and a General Legislature constituted, that General Legislature might be empowered by the Act ... to confer on Local Legislatures such powers as it is now sought to secure for them by the Resolutions of the Conference."³⁴⁹ Like Russell, Gordon was proposing a measure of coercion in order to achieve a union legislative in nature, arguing that the local legislatures should be disenfranchised, not because of any opposition to regional power per se, but from of a conviction that the principle must be established which would assert the primacy of the central over the provincial. He stressed this to Cardwell "I care little for the amount of powers given, if the Central Legislature is the source from which they emanate: but I think almost any sacrifice is desirable which would break the continuity between the independent Legislatures of the past and the Local Legislatures of the future."³⁵⁰ It was felt imperative to give a clear indication of the strength of the new central authority, the local governments being unwilling to give up sufficient power; Gordon was advocating that such powers should be passed down by the Sovereign instead. Careworn from his experience of the difficulties during the *Trent* crisis and the petty politics of his legislature, Gordon's concern was with the establishment of a durable national power, signing off, "I write this despatch in great haste, and I must request you pardon the abruptness of its language."³⁵¹

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.Ibid., p. 216.

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CO 880, vol. 14, Gordon to Cardwell, 21 November, 1864.

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Ibid.

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Reconciling the Federal Structure

At the helm however, reservations over the federal/legislative imbalance to the scheme were overruled by pragmatism and realism. The Colonial Office acknowledged that the formidable obstacles they faced to accomplishing a strong legislative union came from the parochialism of the Maritime Provinces, and still more problematically the autonomous desires of the French speaking community of Lower Canada. Under-secretary Sir Frederick Rogers wrote that "the great difficulty is to arrange for a real union of the five provinces ... on terms which shall make the central or federal legislation really dominant, so as to make one body politic of the whole, and yet to provide security to the French Canadians that this dominancy would not be used to swamp their religion and habits."³⁵² In the Foreign Office Russell realised that in order to accomplish confederation quickly special dispensation would have to be given either to the Maritime Provinces or to the French Canadians or both. Tellingly Russell was prepared to use not only compromise but even coercion to bring this about. In a directive to Cardwell, the Foreign Secretary summed the matter up thus, "The question will be, whether the Maritime Provinces should be coerced in order to form a federal union, or whether the governor of Lower Canada should be forced to consent to a legislative union, all their separate privileges and laws being secured to them in the Act of Union. I incline to the latter plan."³⁵³ Russell therefore, while preferring the implementation of a tight legislative system, was prepared to yield either by enacting protective laws for the French Canadians or by accepting the federal principle completely. Despite Russell's inclination towards his latter plan - a legislative union with unique mechanisms for French Canadian self-governance - Cardwell recognised that, with the Quebec Scheme already

Ibid.

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Sir Fredrick Rogers, quoted in Creighton, p. 216.

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Russell to Cardwell, PRO 30, vol. 22,, 11 September 1865.

virtually assured passage through the Canadian legislature (the conference and its resolutions having been driven by a coalition of the main parties), the far safer and faster route was to bank on this acceptance as the basis of confederation. They would therefore proceed under the federal principle, if necessary overcoming resistance in the Maritime Provinces where leaders still needed to garner support from opposition parties.

Gordon continued to petition for legislative union arguing that the multi-culturalism of Lower Canada need not prove insurmountable to achieving it. In a further dispatch to Cardwell he appealed to the British example to show that it was possible. Gordon wrote, "Scotland, like Lower Canada, has its own laws, its own Church and even in a manner its own currency: but although all these are at the absolute mercy of the Imperial Parliament, common sense and justice have sufficed to prevent any such assaults upon the peculiar institutions of that portion of the United Kingdom as would be repugnant to the feelings of its inhabitants."³⁵⁴ Despite Gordon's strength of feeling, the two cases diverged significantly for several reasons. For one the Acts of Union in England and Scotland had followed nearly a century of failed previous attempts, a time-frame now unacceptable to the imperial government. Also in this instance there were not one but four minority groups that were required to entrust the safekeeping of their institutions to the central authority, for in addition to the Lower Canadians, the people and political culture of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island also had to be factored in. Moreover unlike England in the Act of Union with Scotland, Upper Canada would itself come to form a minority in the unified whole.

Cardwell also received encouraging dispatches from Lord Monck which helped reconcile him to that part of the Quebec Scheme. Monck wrote to reassure the Colonial Secretary that while confederation must by necessity be entered into on federal lines, the new nation would eventually evolve into that legislative union which Britain desired. Indeed, Canada's Governor General had already begun planning political manoeuvres to bring this

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about. In one critique of the Quebec scheme, Monck had feared an anomaly if the colonial architects persisted in having a 'local administrator', meaning a provincial legislature, in the same province of the union in which the seat of the central government was to be established, in this case Upper Canada. Monck thought it better that the legislature should be dispensed with in Upper Canada, and that the members returned from that province to the central government should by default also become the "local authority" to deal with matters purely Upper Canadian. Ironically enough, to support this point Monck cited the precedent of the United States - that example which many were so desperate to avoid – noting that the District of Columbia, home of the US capital, was governed directly by Federal authorities in Washington. Monck believed that a recreation of this American template in British North America would ultimately assist in updating the new confederation from a federal model into the legislative one that the imperial government preferred. Monck wrote to Cardwell that, "I look upon this Confederation scheme, as it is called, as only a transition state. I hope that before many more years elapse it may become a complete Legislative Union, and I think this consummation would be facilitated and hastened, if one of the sections, and that the most important and powerful, were already in all respects directly ruled by the Central authority."³⁵⁵ Crucially Monck believed he could bring his Canadian subjects to agree to these changes, but required time to do so. Knowing that Brown was in London as he wrote, Monck urged Cardwell not to disclose his sentiments to the Canadian who, as 'a Toronto man', might immediately oppose the dissolution of the Upper Canadian legislature.

Exerting pressure to pass Confederation

This latest protestation made no impact on Cardwell who aimed to motivate Gordon by impressing on him that the cabinet unanimously supported the scheme. The Colonial

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Secretary wrote "I think I may safely assure you that they are one and all most anxious to promote the end in view, that they will allow no obstacle to prevent it, if those obstacles can be surmounted: and that if there are provisions which they do not entirely approve, they will be very slow to consider those provisions as rising to the magnitude of insurmountable obstacles." The Colonial Secretary told Gordon therefore "I fully expect that I shall soon have to instruct you in their name to promote the scheme of the Delegates to the utmost of your power ... here there is but one desire, which is to prosecute to the utmost the work in which you are engaged."³⁵⁶ Gladstone had heard from Argyle that "This confederation of the N. Am. British Provinces is (of) and immense significance and an immense surprise ... I trust it may succeed. It will be as great a benefit to us as to the colonies themselves."³⁵⁷ According to Gladstone in terms of uniting the colonies Britain should assist "by every means in its power."

Brown had arrived in London and was present when Gordon's polemic was relayed to the Colonial Office, giving the government an early opportunity to show their resolve in making confederation a reality.³⁵⁸ That the passing of confederation had become critical was evident from Britain's assurance that they would quash the recalcitrance displayed by their representatives in the Maritime Provinces. The Canadian was left in no doubt that Cardwell would not prevaricate and intended union to take place along the lines already drawn up at Quebec. The under-secretary informed Brown that "the dispatch going out on Saturday would settle it completely and if not Mr. Cardwell would not hesitate to see that the cordial aid of all the Governors was given to the scheme."³⁵⁹ The Colonial Office's treatment of

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Cardwell to Gordon, 26 November 1864.

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Argyle to Gladstone, Gladstone papers, private, CO 42/643, 25 November 1864.

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Cardwell to Monck.

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Creighton, p. 218.

Brown also indicated the unequivocal imperial backing for the Quebec scheme. Brown informed MacDonald that “Our scheme has given prodigious satisfaction here. The Ministry, the Conservatives and the Manchester men are all delighted with it – and everything Canadian has gone up in public estimation immensely.” Tellingly Brown noted how in the many gala receptions he was invited to he was treated much as a foreign ambassador or dignitary, indicating the British resolve to see established a new pseudo-independent national state. Writing to his wife about how he and the confederation scheme were received Brown wrote “nothing could be more laudatory. It outdoes anything that ever went to any British colony – praises our statesmanship, discretion, loyalty and so on.”³⁶⁰ On December 22, Brown wrote to MacDonald that “there is a manifest desire in almost every quarter that ere long the British American colonies should shift for themselves and in some quarters evident regret that we did not declare at once for independence.”³⁶¹

The degree of responsible government entrusted to the provinces was such that the matter ultimately resided with their colonial parliaments, who themselves might be forced to take the question to a general plebiscite. Cardwell knew that the first piece of imperial weight added was by ensuring that the British representatives in the provinces do their utmost to promote the Quebec Scheme. He therefore sent a circular memo to Monck, MacDonnell and Gordon stating even more unequivocally that all shades of opinion in Britain were unanimous on confederation. Cardwell wrote that “it is the earnest desire of the Government that the plan may succeed; and I think public opinion is undivided about it.”³⁶² The memo made it clear that, notwithstanding any personal reservations they may have, confederation was the official policy of the imperial government and the Governor Generals should to impress the cause of the Quebec Resolutions on their respective provinces. The Colonial Secretary

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Brown to Anne Brown, 5 December 1864.

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Brown to Macdonald, Brown papers, 22 December 1864.

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Cardwell to Gordon 10 December 1864.

devised a further tactic with Brown and Monck however. It was agreed between the three that when the new parliamentary session opened in British North America, the Canadian legislature should be the first to assemble, as its expected endorsement of the Quebec Scheme might help smooth its passage in the Maritime Provinces where the result was less certain.³⁶³

Summary

Since the very outset of the Civil War the presence of British North America along the US border had led to a multitude of accidental and sometimes deliberate breaches of neutrality, constantly threatening an escalation of the conflict into the provinces. During 1863 the danger had stemmed not only been from the provinces but from also from shipbuilding taking place in England for use as Confederate warships and disputes over British sailors accused of running the blockade. Whereas before the great fear surrounding these issues was that Seward would manipulate them for use as a *cassu-belli*, the British government now worried that the Secretary of State had been overtaken by still more powerful and malevolent forces in the cabinet.

This was especially so as the Federal army and navy had now expanded beyond all recognition in size and strength from that which they had been at the outset. In appearing to be forging a new great military power founded on the abhorred power-hungry and mobocratic US republicanism, the Civil War had threatened to realise the intense antebellum British fear of US hegemony over North America. Over the previous year Britain had toyed with intervening to make reality Southern independence as a counterweight to this power, however the progress of the Civil War now made this prospect fraught with new dangers and complexities. Having spurned the South's advances for so long the chance existed that the Confederacy might separate without friendship established with Britain, rendering it difficult to address slavery in the new Southern nation.

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Economically, forcing the Confederacy to win its own war had necessitated the South creating its own industry and manufactures, threatening to make it a commercial rival of Britain as much as a partner. From a strategic viewpoint too this held out the alarming prospect of British North America facing an onslaught from the North without Britain receiving assistance from the South, and even put the British West Indies under threat from the Confederacy. In 1864 therefore the continental balance-of-power had reached a most critical juncture with the British provinces remaining inherently weak. Efforts made both to delegate the burden of security to the provinces and establish a new continental power out of them had as a result continued to intensify. Britain's policy on accomplishing this had settled on colonial union, leading to a strong endorsement of a provincial conference at Charlottetown to discuss its terms.

CHAPTER 7

THE FINAL SECURITY CRISIS, 1864-65

Confederation or withdraw

Having agreed that the Canadian legislature would assemble first with a view to passing the Quebec Scheme, should its passage fail the alternative remained the

replacement of their legislative system with a new federal arrangement for Upper and Lower Canada. While in London to promote the plan, Brown exhibited confidence that the imperial cabinet would consent, writing to McDonald that "If we insist on it, they will put the scheme through just as we ask it."³⁶⁴ By July the Colonial Secretary wrote to Monck that "I cannot undertake to ask the Imperial Parliament for its sanction of any scheme which does not unite all British North America in one government."³⁶⁵ The home government were therefore increasingly determined to implement the larger union, and now explicitly threatened the provinces' abandonment if it was not accepted. Adderley argued that before the Quebec Scheme was voted upon in the provincial legislatures it should be made clear that, in the event of its rejection, British North America could not expect the imperial government to continue to prop up its defence. Adderley said "these Provinces were very much mistaken if they thought that by holding back from Confederation they would continue to receive from England the same support in men and supplies as before." Adderley informed Cardwell that he "would tell them plainly that there never would be a Minister in this country strong enough to induce the House of Commons, after an opportunity of independence had been offered, to vote supplies for their special purposes, and the sooner they gave up any such idea the better."³⁶⁶ It was therefore insinuated that if the provinces wished to maintain imperial military support they must now show their willingness to contribute to the upkeep of their national security. On 21 January 1865 Cardwell sent Monck a despatch stating that Britain wished to postpone negotiations on defence until after confederation had taken place.

The home government also saw a need to extricate itself from what might be a vastly increased commitment. This was because the course of the Civil War and increasing evidence of Union victory panicked Canadian officials into now putting forward extreme

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Macdonald 188, Brown to Macdonald, private and confidential, 22 December 1864.

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Cardwell to Monck, private, A 755, 27 July 1865.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 177 (1865), col. 613.

defence measures which would be expensive and impractical to implement. The Canadian government desired gunboats to be placed on the lakes, which Cardwell could not allow in peacetime as it would contravene the 1817 agreement. Equally the government would not commit military resources to local defence when in the event of war they would in all likelihood be required for operations elsewhere. The Colonial Secretary wrote to Monck that "if that worst of all calamities, a War with the United States shall break out, we must be free to dispose of the Navy & the Army according to the exigencies of that terrible time, unembarrassed by any precise stipulations like these."³⁶⁷ The Canadians moreover wanted additional imperial funding to improve the land defences. The provincial delegation desired the imperial government to guarantee a loan which would then enable an act to be passed in the Canadian legislature for fortifications to be built west of Montreal. Britain, still holding out for a solid commitment from the province before allotting expense however, demanded the reverse, Cardwell asking for the assembly to reach agreement on the scheme and then request the loan. Cardwell wrote to Palmerston of the Canadian's now extensive defence proposals stating that "I hope that when we meet for the transaction of business they may not press their impossible demands."³⁶⁸ This would mean further standoff and potential delay to achieving British North American union. It was becoming increasingly pressing to take some measures towards defence immediately. Thus having desired to postpone defence talks until arrangements had been made for union, the progress of the Civil War placed the imperial government in a quandary as the Union's ever increasing grip on the South rendered inaction dangerous.

This progress was causing as great concern in Britain and now Canada. Sherman's devastation of the Southern heartland and Lee's inability to launch a counter-attack in Virginia forced upon them the sense that hostilities could soon be ended, at which point the

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Cardwell to Monck, confidential, a755, 27 May 1865.

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Palmerston to Cardwell, Palmerston papers, 27 April 1865.

continent would then lay at the mercy of the Federal Army known to number in the millions. Still smarting from the Schleswig-Holstein crisis British statesmen even at this late stage would not rule out that the North and South would undergo reconciliation partly by joining forces against the North American provinces, much as Austria and Prussia had done against the Danes. Fitzgerald highlighted that “why, it was only last year that we had the spectacle of two great military Powers of Europe, who had objects of their own to gain—thinking, moreover, thereby to establish concord between themselves—turning upon a third and defenceless Power and committing acts of violence and spoliation which will ever redound to their shame.”³⁶⁹ This moreover was not just irrational paranoia. Part of a despatch from Seward had become widely circulated which advocated “a postponement of the question of separation, upon which the war is waged, and a mutual direction of the efforts of the Government, as well as those of the insurgents, to some extrinsic policy or scheme for a season, during which passions might be expected to subside, and the armies be reduced, and trade and intercourse between people of both sections be resumed.”³⁷⁰ The fears were also sustained by rumours that during Lincoln’s aborted peace talks with Alexander Stephens, the Confederate Secretary of State for War, one of the delegates had proposed a joint third party war on France or Britain.³⁷¹ By this time moreover, reconciliation or otherwise, Britain was faced with the prospect it had looked on with trepidation throughout the preceding years, that the South would be conquered and Union troops freed up for operations elsewhere. Palmerston therefore warned the Queen of “the probability that, whenever the Civil war in America shall be ended, the Northern States will make demands upon England that cannot be complied with.”³⁷² The same feeling was conveyed to the

³⁶⁹

Ibid.

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Ibid, col. 1544

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Winks, p. 356.

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Letters of Queen Victoria, Vol. 1, pp 248-49.

imperial government by its representatives in the provinces. In a series of key communications between Gordon and his confidant Gladstone the Lieutenant Governor wrote to the Chancellor that “the conquest of the South (which appears imminent) will be followed by a war with England ...war *here* will very speedily follow peace *there*.”³⁷³

The Fenian fears

Insecurity over the American Irish population also intensified towards the end of the conflict. The final three months of the war began with a note of caution from Palmerston to Somerset which stated “The warnings of eventual hostility on the part of the United States are not to be disregarded, and the Irish Fenians in North America would give us trouble in Ireland if we had war with America.”³⁷⁴ The great problem now was that even if, as appeared increasingly unlikely, the Confederacy became independent, the remainder of the Union would, militarily if not industrially and economically, emerge far stronger and more powerful than it had been with the South before the war. This made the hostility towards Britain even more concerning, particularly with the fenian influence in the North. Bright stated:

Do not for a moment believe that because the United States are in this great calamity—out of which they still will come a great nation—do not believe for a moment that acts like these can be forgotten now, or forgotten hereafter. There are people in America interested apparently in creating ill-feeling towards England. There are two millions of Irishmen in America, and wherever an Irishman plants his foot on any foreign country there stands an enemy of England.³⁷⁵

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Gordon to Gladstone, 8 February 1865

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Palmerston to Somerset 15 January 1865.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 170, Col. 67, 27 March 1863.

The New York Herald too was quoted in the Index stating

In six months at the furthest, this unhappy rebellion will be brought to a close. We shall then have an account to settle with the Governments that have either outraged us by active sympathy and aid which they have afforded them. Let France and England beware how they swell up this catalogue of wrongs. By the time specified we shall have unemployed a veteran army of close upon a million of the finest troops in the world, with whom we shall be in a position not only to drive the French out of Mexico and to annex Canada, but, by the aid of our powerful navy, even to return the compliment of intervention in European affairs.

Illinois Senator Lovejoy threatened that they would aid and support Irish, French Canadian and chartist rebellion against England. Russell was somewhat embarrassed when even forced to respond to rumours that following Lincoln's March inauguration Britain would only acknowledge him as 'President of the Northern States.'

Military security therefore had to be addressed alongside the question of confederation. The basis for defence was the second report compiled by Colonel Jervois, laid before parliament in February 1865. Jervois's report indicated that the British threat of pulling out unless union was achieved was calculated to reverse the inaction of local people towards defence. It was observed "that the prospect of the withdrawal of the imperial forces from the western districts in accordance with instructions from this country previous to the confederation movement, has a depressing effect upon the efforts that are being made for the improvement of the organization of the militia of those districts." The report argued however that under the prospective danger regular troops should be maintained to protect the key military positions in the east of the province, both in terms of sustaining a defence and in providing an evacuation point if that defence should go awry. Indeed, the need to buy time applied to defence on the ground itself, as the initial Federal onslaught risked the

annihilation of whatever troops stood to meet them. It was for this reason that Jervois advanced the importance of bringing the fortifications into to an effective state, reporting that "It is at the commencement of a war that the greatest danger is to be apprehended; and it is submitted that ... only ... fortifications ... can provide against our troops being overpowered at the first onset, or that time can be obtained for rendering the militia available for the defence of the country." Jervois's argument therefore was that imperial troops, with fixed defences to enable them to absorb the opening blow, had a vital role to play as a rallying point and core for the local militia forces to supplement.

The cities on the St Lawrence were the crucial hubs to at least give the breathing space on the ground in Canada for Britain's overarching naval strategy to take effect. Jervois identified that "The positions of greatest military importance in the country are Montreal and Quebec". Quebec was vital as a conduit with the mother county, "the first point of military communication between Canada and Great Britain, and the point to which the British forces must retire, if overpowered." Montreal was key "because being at the head of the sea navigation of the St. Lawrence and the focus of all communication by land and water between the eastern and western districts ... it is the commercial and strategic capital of Canada, and, from its position on the frontier, is moreover the point upon which the enemy could most readily make a grand attack." This defence in turn therefore relied on imperial naval superiority. The report concluded "With those two points placed in a condition for defence, and the river between Montreal and Quebec commanded by iron-plated vessels, a successful resistance could be made to any attempt to subjugate the country, so long as Great Britain had the command of the sea." With the current pressure making the provincial government more willing to participate in the defence measures the principle was agreed that Britain would take responsibility for building the works at Quebec and maintain a body of 10,000 troops to help drill the 75,000-strong Canadian militia while Canada themselves would undertake the fortifying of Montreal.³⁷⁶ Cardwell justified the division as such "We think

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that is a right division; that the position which is the gate of Canada, through which the military and naval forces of England are to enter to defend Canada, should be fortified by the mother country; and that Montreal, the strategic and commercial capital of Canada, should be fortified at the expense of the Canadians themselves."³⁷⁷ The next problem however was gaining support for the measures with the public and with parliament. Indeed, *The Times* stated in February 1865 that "When the public hear of Canadian defences, they experience nothing but a feeling of uneasiness and perplexity."³⁷⁸

The debates on the fortification scheme

The imperial government bought the proposals for the fortifications at Quebec into Parliament the same month. Paradoxically however, the issues at stake were felt so serious that it threatened to stifle the debate itself. The underlying fear was so prevalent that it was worried that even having the debate itself threatened to bring on American aggression. When Derby rose to speak in the upper chamber he gave the prefix: "My Lords, I feel the present state of our relations with the Federal States of America to be so critical that for my own part I should have been desirous of maintaining an absolute silence" though the opposition leader wished to "leave to Her Majesty's Government the responsibility of dealing with this difficult and delicate question, lest any interference on our part should tend to increase the difficulty of their task."³⁷⁹ Almost to a man, every speaker who rose between February and May 1865 did so by initially expressing a strong conciliatory message to what he hoped would be future peaceful relations between Britain and the United States. The issue was compounded by doubts about the chances of defending Canada even with the

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 177 (1865), col. 819.

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The Times, 21 February 1865.

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Ibid., col. 426.

new fortifications installed. Opponents of the government's plan harboured strong reservations about holding 1500 miles of border which might be assailed from numerous points and which was isolated from Britain geographically. As Lord Elcho put it, "there was an instinct which told everyone that such a country as Canada, with a population of 2,500,000 persons and an extended frontier could not be defended by England, which was 4,000 miles distant, against America, furnished with all the munitions and requisites for war, and also with railways capable of transporting at any moment those munitions to the Canadian frontier" and that "Not even with the assistance of England was it possible for Canada to defend herself against America."³⁸⁰

Indeed, opponents of the government's proposals – refuting Jervois's conclusions - called on other military experts to argue that British North America could not be held. One was Major Anson whose own distinguished service record included action in the Crimea, China, and the Indian Mutiny. Anson moreover had accompanied General George McClellan's army as an observer early in the war and knew the country of Canada well. Anson believed "that Canada in a military point of view and in the sense pointed out by Colonel Jervois, and adopted by the Government, was utterly and entirely indefensible."³⁸¹ Indeed, as tokenistic as they were accused of being, the argument was made that the government's measures threatened merely to provide an irresistible allure to Americans tempted by an easy win. It was argued for example that "Surely it stood to common sense that a little British army stationed there, 3,000 miles away from its base, would seem a glittering bait to American ambition."

Defenders of the fortification scheme argued the reverse however, finding it absurd to believe that by refraining to defend Canada the province would be made safer. Questioning "that the presence of ... regular troops would be nothing but a temptation to the Americans to

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 178 (1865), col. 799.

³⁸¹

Ibid.

make war in Canada for the sake of the honour and glory to be acquired by their defeat or capture” one proponent of the measures therefore asked “was there no temptation on the other side of the account, supposing the ... advice be taken and every red coat withdrawn from British North America? Surely by withholding British forces from North America the United States would be allured by the prospect of an even more simple campaign to annex the provinces.”³⁸² In terms of the logistical problem of waging war so far from home, there were also defiant counter-arguments. Sir Frederick Smith, whose own military experience went as far back as service in the Napoleonic Wars, claimed that he had never heard “an old term so much abused as was ‘the base of operations’.” Smith asked “Where was General Sherman’s base of operations when he marched through Georgia and Carolina? Our base of operations in respect of the defence of Canada must, of course, be on the other side the Atlantic. Our base of operations would be at Halifax, where our stores would be collected.”³⁸³ A further report on defence, conducted by Arthur Simmons, argued war on land should be almost exclusively carried on by colonial troops, whichever part of the empire they were drawn from. Simmons even suggested assembling an invasion party from India and Australia which would be cheaper than deploying British regulars, arguing that:

probably the most effective means of attacking the United States, and carrying war into her territories, would be by a well-planned expedition from India, in which Her Majesty’s Indian subjects could be employed with effect without drawing on her European subjects, who are more difficult to procure in numbers and more costly to maintain. Her Majesty’s Australian subjects might also be inclined to assist in such an enterprise, which would tend greatly to the security of the rising cities on their coasts, and of their trade.³⁸⁴

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Ibid. col. 838

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 178 (1865), col. 831.

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This issue also hinged on Jervois's conviction however that withholding imperial troops was inadvisable due to them being a focal point from which the local militia could draw strength, inspiration and guidance. The Captain in this respect emphasised the moral value of British ground presence, as much if not more than the physical, writing "if the works now recommended be constructed ... the regular army would become a nucleus and support, round which the people of Canada would rally to resist aggression, and to preserve that connexion with the mother country which their loyalty, their interests, and their love of true freedom alike make them desirous to maintain."

Jervois had summed up this dilemma to the imperial government: "The question appears to be; - whether the British force now in Canada shall be withdrawn, in order to avoid the risk of its defeat, or whether the necessary measures shall be taken to enable that force to be of use for the defence of the province." Palmerston, continuing to regard any abandonment of empire as reprehensible - especially in the face of intimidation by the United States - stood against the notion that a British military presence would do more to invite an American attack than prevent it, arguing "Sir, there is no better security for peace than strength to resist attack, if attack should come. That is no provocation."³⁸⁵ The Colonial Secretary defended the need to adopt Jervois's recommendations by reiterating the policy that conspicuous strength was the best basis for security. Cardwell stated that "whatever may be the prospects —and I hope the prospect of relations between the United States and Great Britain is not one in which we are obliged to see hostilities—it is not on the justice or goodwill of any other country, nor on the forbearance of any other country, we are to calculate for our defence. It is on our own position, on our own inherent strength and means of defence that we must ever rely."³⁸⁶

JLA Simmons, *Defence of Canada Considered as an Imperial Question with Reference to War with America*, (London, 1865), p. 9.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 177 (1865), col. 1635.

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Ibid., col. 1567.

Palmerston moreover vehemently stood by the government's claim that British North America could be successfully defended and moreover was not alone in his conviction. Disraeli stood up for the fortification scheme and rallied against those who doubted Canada's defensibility due to the problem of holding the vast border, denying any such necessity. It was intoned, "When we are told it is impossible to defend a frontier of 1,500 miles, I ask who has ever requested you to defend such a frontier? ... Austria has an immense frontier, but Austria does not defend it all. She takes care that when she is invaded there shall be forts round which her troops can rally for her defence. That is all we wish to see."³⁸⁷ Indeed, the report confirmed exigent British appraisals that a wholesale defence of the province was unworkable, and therefore sought to offset a total capitulation by maintaining control of the St Lawrence. In addition to the fortifications therefore the report highlighted that measures would have to be taken to arm the river and enhance the communications. Summarising his report Jervois wrote that:

I observed that, although, owing to the length and nature of the frontier of Canada, it was impossible to protect it throughout its whole extent, an enemy must nevertheless acquire possession of certain vital points before he could obtain any decided military advantage ... and that, if proper arrangements were made for the defence of those places by the construction of fortifications, the provision of gun-boats, and the improvement of communications, the militia and volunteer forces of the country, if properly organized, and aided by British troops, would be enabled to hold those positions during the period, (only about six months in the year), when military operations on a large scale could be carried on against them.

The Divisiveness of the Measures

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Ibid., col. 1577.

Those who took the problems of North American defence to spell ultimate British capitulation therefore were accused of failing to distinguish between the tactical and strategic and even the offensive and the defensive. Thus while Britain might have to fight a rearguard action in Canada, it did not necessarily follow that it could not overwhelm the United States elsewhere. Some statesmen therefore lost patience with the idea that Canada's weakness equalled Britain's weakness. Alexander Kinglake, who not only was an MP but a historian in the process of publishing an eight volume study of the Crimean War argued that "It was one of the common mistakes of belligerents to confound the cause of the quarrel with the business of the war, while, in point of fact, they were quite distinct things." Therefore while it seemed inevitable that the United States would open hostilities in Canada, it was foolhardy to accept this gauntlet and attempt to force a victorious result at such vulnerable point. An effective analogy was made, contending that to limit the military focus to contesting Canada rather than carrying the fight to the United States would be like an "unskilful boxer" who "put his hands to the parts where he felt the blows instead of striking at the vital parts of his adversary in return."³⁸⁸ At the same time it did not follow however that Canada must be forsaken. This was especially the case as whatever the state of Canadian defence, the point would remain that the province represented Britain and the empire. To the suggestion that Britain should exclusively look to strike a blow at America and leave the Canadians to fend for themselves General Peel contended

There is ... a great difference between not fighting another person's battle and not fighting our own. It would be no question of our going to war for Canada; but, that if war should be declared against us, and that Canada was attacked on our account ..., that we should assist her to the utmost of our power. This is said to be "fair weather policy" and "tall talk;" but ... no policy so

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deserving of being designated "foul weather policy" and "small talk" as that of those who proclaim to the world that we do not intend to defend ourselves.³⁸⁹

While it was agreed that offensive operations should be boldly and aggressively prosecuted against the United States therefore, honour dictated that Canadian defence must not be neglected. As Kinglake put it, "We must do our worst elsewhere, but, at the same time, we must do our best in Canada."³⁹⁰ As a result the fortification plan remained crucial. As Jervois's recommendations and the government's defence plan were being dissected Kinglake issued a reprimand to the dissenters. He pointed out that the Colonel had merely been carrying out his remit of surveying the conditions for local defence, not planning a strategic offensive against the United States. Thus "The question put to Colonel Jervois had been how best to defend Canada. If that gallant officer had been asked what, in the event of war between England and the United States, would be the best policy for England, his Report would perhaps have contained different matter."³⁹¹ Indeed, while the survey was primarily concerned with local security in Canada, Jervois had sounded a note of caution about the difficulties that the Civil War had rendered over Britain's main offensive strategy in the event of war with the Union, the use of blockade. Given Federal progress the Captain warned of the scale of blockading force Britain would require, especially in iron-plated ships. The Colonel reported that "Considering the development of the American navy during the present civil war, this blockade can only be maintained by powerful ships, capable of moving at high speed, with a proportion of iron-clad vessels which could hold their own against the iron-clad navy of America." The report compiled by Simmons also drew attention to the problems that might inflict upon the Royal Navy and therefore Britain's ability to effectually sustain both its offensive operations against US commerce, and its defensive duties in the

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 177 (1865), col. 843.

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Kinglake, *ibid.*

³⁹¹

Ibid.

provinces. Garrisons and fortifications must also therefore be kept in a state of readiness at the key naval stations in the provinces, the West Indies and Bermuda. Simmons wrote that “without these fortified bases of operations off the coast of North America, a blockade would, on account of its great length – 3,000 miles – and distance from England, be almost impossible, (even with them it would be most difficult), and American ships of war and Alabamas would swarm; so that the operation of maintaining supplies and maintaining an army in Canada, even when the navigation was not closed by the rigour of the climate, would be attended with great risk and vast losses.”³⁹² Again, the Civil War had engendered and displayed the Federal ability, particularly with their growing iron-cased fleet, to carry vital enemy harbours and ports. Simmons conveyed that “The fall of New Orleans, and more lately that of Fort Fisher, has clearly shown, that in presence of the means of attack which in the course of four years of war have been developed in America, works for the defence of these dockyards must be of the most substantial character and of large extent, and that they must be defended by numerous garrisons, probably not much less than 15,000 men for each.”

Under the compelling circumstances, the £50,000 asked for to begin the work at Quebec was voted, however this bought on an entire fresh bout of controversy. As there was such a clamour for the colonies to fund their own defence parliament would almost certainly have balked at a large appropriation for defence. However by doing the opposite and only committing £50,000 Cardwell left himself and the government open to accusations on both sides of the Atlantic of selling the provinces short. The government was therefore in an invidious position. Indeed, when word reached Canada not simply of the amount to be spent but the debate and bickering needed even to allot that, spirits in British North America plummeted. In the Canadian legislature John A. MacDonald even told parliamentarians that the reports must have a misprint and the actual amount intended was £500,000. This news

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JLA Simmons, *Defence of Canada Considered as an Imperial Question with Reference to War with America*, (London, 1865), p. 13.

in turn invited more censure on the home government. Firstly the imperial government was accused of demoralising the British North Americans, and secondly Cardwell was exposed to vicious questioning over whether he had misled the country on the agreement reached with the Canadian ministers on the defence plans. Grey stepped in to argue that the £50,000 was merely an initial grant based on all the work that could be carried out in the coming year, and that this figure would eventually raise to at least £200,000. This however then bought on the question of whether, if the entire defences were not to be completed for a number of years, they were any worth when the danger with the United States was said to be imminent.

Debate partly hinged on US intentions, and here the issue was clouded by argument and counter-argument. Fitzgerald claimed confidence that the Lincoln Administration had no designs on British North America but placed less faith in popular feeling among the Northern 'mob'. Fitzgerald urged the government to undertake construction of the forts so that: "the population of America—and I am speaking now not of those placed at the head of its affairs, or of those who might have influence—but I say emphatically, the population, intoxicated with success, should not allow themselves to be led into a war with this country under a belief that Canada is incapable of making any defence."³⁹³ Forster and Bright however continued to defend the Northern cause and its system. Denying the contention that the Federal government could not control the people Forster pointed out that the executive of the United States was even more independent than that of Britain and that consequently the American President possessed more power than the British Prime Minister. The fact also that the House of Representatives sat for considerably longer than Britain's own House of Commons provided a greater check against "temporary influences." Forster therefore argued that "If an English Ministry had made the failures which have occurred in the conduct of the American armies and of American policy the English people would not have shown the same long-forbearing patience, but we should have had change after change of Administration. Therefore the fear that the American Government is likely to plunge into war through any

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temporary irritation on the part of the people is totally unreasonable.”³⁹⁴ Even in terms of the ‘mob’ themselves Forster highlighted that the emotional dynamic in invading British North America would be vastly different to that of the Civil War, and therefore would inhibit aggression. He argued that “The Northern people believe that they are fighting to prevent the destruction of their country; and in any attack upon Canada they could not feel that they were fighting in anything but an unprovoked war for empire, and that would be a very different feeling from that which now animates them.”³⁹⁵

Whether the end of the Civil War would spark conflict over British North America was therefore not only a question of popular passion against government restraint but also exhilaration versus exhaustion. Whereas Fitzgerald believed the Union would be swept into Canada on a wave of victorious adrenaline, Disraeli perceived entirely the reverse. Disraeli said of the American public: “I cannot believe that with the debt and the sacrifice and loss of life which war has imposed on them, they will inaugurate peace amongst themselves by an unprovoked war against a nation that is more powerful than the Southern States, and which would be attended with burdens far greater and sacrifices much larger than they now experience, even though their attempt against Canada was in the first instance successful.”³⁹⁶ He dismissed the temptation that British North America might hold for the United States, and believed rather its own war-weariness after four years of combat would inhibit any expansionist aggression towards Canada. Disraeli argued that: “being a sagacious people, I do not think they would seize the moment of exhaustion as the one most

³⁹⁴

Ibid.

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Ibid., col. 1562.

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Forster, *ibid.*.

favourable to the prosecution of an enterprise requiring great resources and immense exertion.”³⁹⁷

In spite of such denials about Federal intentions, the problem was that the uncertainty would persist until the close of the Civil War settled matters one way or another. Watkin, now in London, spoke of the astronomical expenditure that would be required to even approach parity with the military forces now at the disposal of the United States. Warning against entering into an arms-race that would only serve to cripple both economies while increasing tension and hostility between them, Watkin argued that the security of British North America should be sought by purely diplomatic means. Describing the Rush-Bagot agreement that had kept armaments off the lakes as “a precedent of happy history worthy of all gratitude and all imitation” Watkin urged Palmerston “to try negotiation. Place before the minds of American statesmen the neutralization of the Lakes and ask if the frontiers could not be neutralized also. Was it not possible that if Her Majesty’s Government took Brother Jonathan in a quiet mood, he might be disposed to save his own pocket and thereby to save ours, and unite with us to set a bright example to surrounding nations?”³⁹⁸ One problem however was the United States’ announcement of temporary security measures on the lakes which was already putting the treaty of 1817 in jeopardy. With the continued danger of border violations, especially with the St Albans Raid a recent memory they were unlikely to assent to demilitarising the frontier.

Increased Canadian Co-operation

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Ibid., col. 1572.

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Ibid., col. 1602.

Moreover the concerns had largely already had their effect and momentum was moving strongly towards the Canadians agreeing on the union scheme and taking on the agreed portion of local defence. Despite having spent most of the period from November to January fulfilling the mission to England to discuss Confederation, security appeared to unravel so drastically in the early part of 1865 that Brown had no choice but to join a further delegation sent to London in the spring.³⁹⁹ That climax arrived very shortly after in April. Two days after Appomattox Macdonald wrote to Brown that:

“The surrender of Lee and close of the war bring matters to a crisis between England and Canada. Either the United States, flushed with success, with their armies full of flight and their fleet in prime condition, will at once put the pistol to England’s breast and demand satisfaction for the Alabama and Florida affairs, or, we may look to peace for a series of years. Should the first contingency arise, it will be sudden and speedy and no time is to be lost in putting on our armour of defence. Should peaceful counsels prevail, we should settle now the gradual and systematic growth of a defensive system, to be carried on steadily until we find ourselves strong enough.”⁴⁰⁰

The delegation also contained Canadian Minister Cartier who summed up that the overriding focus of imperial policy now was towards Canadian security and confederation, writing that “any one conversing with Englishmen, or reading the English papers, will see the question which prevails there is the defence of the country.” Cartier furthermore informed the Colonial Office that he too saw confederation as a response to the military problem, telling Cardwell that “Singly the two Canadas cannot defend themselves, but if united with the Maritime Provinces; a perfect system of defence can be devised in connection with the mother

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 246.

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Macdonald to Brown, 11 April 1865.

country.” Indeed the Canadian assembly had essentially reached a like-mind with the imperial government that in its design to make the provinces more self-sufficient the scheme would render the new nation significantly more valuable to the empire. Cardwell was told by the Canadian finance minister that confederation was “not in any way to weaken the connection with the Mother Country, but rather to remove those causes which now afforded many parties in England arguments for asserting that the connection was mutually disadvantageous.”⁴⁰¹

Following the building realisation of potential American aggression therefore bought on by the St Albans raid and the imminent cessation of hostilities in the US, Canada had already begun to accept more responsibility for security. \$2,000,000 had been voted for the defence works and 20,000 already enrolled for the militia. In terms of the province’s population and resources this was the equivalent of Britain receiving 240,000 volunteers and allotting £20,000,000 for military purposes. Of the plan to form a volunteer force only Monck wrote “If we can get nothing better we must put up with it and try to do the best we can with the instruments with which we are supplied.”⁴⁰² The strength of the militia was bought up to 25,000 effectives and Colonel Sir Patrick McDougall assumed responsibility for training. The Canadian Legislature now declared it was ready to undertake settlement and governance of the arable sections of the North West, and would construct the defences at Montreal if Britain would address Quebec and arm the pair.⁴⁰³ The Canadian legislature now however suggested adopting measures much more promising. Particularly given the inherent British weakness on the lakes the provincial legislature now put forward a plan to reconstruct the harbour defences at Kingston to enable possible passage of armed vessels. As Jervois reported:

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 295.

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Mayers, *Dixie and the Dominion*, p. 54.

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Creighton, *The Road to Confederation*, p. 96.

“Last year there appeared to be no probability that measures would be taken by which a Naval force could be placed on any of the lakes, and without such force it would be impossible to suggest any plan for the defence of Upper Canada. Now however, it is understood that the Government of Canada contemplate making provision for a fortified Harbour and Naval Establishment at Kingston, with a view to a Naval force being placed on Lake Ontario for the protection of the western districts”

Partly to encourage such contributions, on May 11 the Colonial Naval Defence Act passed through the imperial parliament, enabling colonies to supplement the naval strength of the empire in times of war and thus contribute to their own maritime security. This was particularly valuable given the weakness on the Great Lakes. Palmerston was spooked by the American purchase of vessels from British North American shipbuilders, believing it a prelude to invasion. The Prime Minister wrote “There is something mysterious about these launches, Could they not have got them sooner, more cheaply and as good in their own dockyards? What they are really meant for one cannot say. Their size is quite enough for carrying guns, and it is probable they are destined to cover the landing of troops on our shores in the Lakes.”⁴⁰⁴ Putting this construction work to imperial use would be far more welcome. Cardwell hoped “it would be the foundation of a naval force maintained by the energy and at the expense of the colonies, constituting a most valuable addition to the Imperial defences.”⁴⁰⁵ Adderly said “the recent example of the Canadian volunteers showed how excellent a feeling pervaded our colonies, and it was surprising that it should be only now that a Bill should be proposed to give power to the colonies to provide vessels of war, weapons, and volunteers for their own defence.”⁴⁰⁶ These measures to relinquish some of

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Foreman, p. 924, 7 February 1865.

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Hansard, CLXXXV, Vol. 177 (1865), cc 1823-4

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Ibid.

the government's responsibility towards imperial defence therefore passed with near universal approval. The under-secretary for the Colonies believed it "to be the best measure relating to the colonies that had been passed during his Parliamentary experience."⁴⁰⁷ For Cardwell the act served "to enable Her Majesty's colonies to make better provision for maritime defence", saying that "no subject had of late years attracted more attention than the development of the qualities of self-reliance in our colonies and the means of enabling them to make provision for their own defence, and so relieve this country from a part of a great burden which had pressed upon it in former times."⁴⁰⁸ The Act was in this respect an extension of the intended purpose of the unification scheme.

Recalcitrance in the Lower Provinces

Indeed, in describing Britain's approach to accomplishing the new union the Colonial Minister summarised this imperial motivation of passing on some of this burden of security. The idea was that a greater state would give an enhanced sense of national importance and therefore an increased sense of duty to its new statesmen to protect it. Only once the provinces had embraced this could they call on British military assistance. When Cardwell in June therefore drafted the imperial view of the Confederation scheme he told Monck that "it treats Canada as a quasi-independent country, primarily responsible for the measures chiefly necessary for its own defence, though assured of the powerful support of England when doing its duty to itself and to her."⁴⁰⁹ It thus intimated again that unless the colonial politicians kept up their side of the bargain Britain would withhold military assistance and in this respect was almost a form of blackmail to attempt to coerce the provinces into the

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

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Cardwell to Monck, private, 17 June 1865.

scheme. Thus the Colonial Minister wrote that with the scheme for local defence set in motion Britain would accept “the reciprocal obligation of defending every portion of the Empire with all the resources at its command” and Canada the maintenance of her connection with the mother country.” The Canadian legislature had adopted the union scheme under the demands of its own internal dysfunction and the security scares bought on by the Civil War, however agreement remained less forthcoming in the Maritime Provinces where parochialism and a lesser feeling of military urgency prevailed.

Ironically therefore while the pressures of defence were leading the imperial government to encourage the provinces to unite in one continental ‘nation’, the same security dilemma was helping discourage the Atlantic Provinces from throwing their lot in with Canada. Britain redoubled its efforts therefore to overcome resistance in the maritime colonies. This began with attempting to quash the resistance of Gordon who had continued to gripe against the Quebec Scheme for its ‘federative’ features. Indeed, Cardwell strongly impressed upon the Lieutenant Governor that on this issue the provinces must defer to the wishes of the imperial government. The Colonial Minister informed Gordon that the cabinet wished to “avoid all appearance of undue pressure, or of dictation, but at the same time to let it be thoroughly understood that this question of Confederation is one in which the Home Government is quite earnest: & considers that its wishes ought to have & will have great weight with the Provinces.”⁴¹⁰ This ‘great weight’ was added to by utilising the influence of Gladstone, who as Gordon’s long-term mentor held considerable influence over him and moreover was front and centre of the imperial drive to impress greater responsibility for defence onto the provinces. Gladstone thus wrote to Gordon on July 11 stating that Confederation is “a great measure: and one which ... it is the right and duty of England to press forward in a special manner.”⁴¹¹ Following the directives of the home government, and

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Cardwell to Gordon, private, Stanmore 1, 13 May 1865

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especially following the encouragement given by Gladstone, the Lieutenant Governor acquiesced in promoting the Quebec Scheme, writing that “I am prepared to do my utmost to promote the wishes of Her Majesty’s government and to act in furtherance of the public pledges they have given.”⁴¹²

Despite Gordon’s conversion however the leader of the New Brunswick legislature AJ Smith continued to resist the feared erosion of his province’s identity by entering into a union with the others. To this end Smith journeyed to England to protest against Confederation in July. The trip however produced further evidence of how and why the imperial government were determined to accelerate the union scheme. Smith found not only a dearth of willing listeners but an apparent unanimous public opinion weighing down on the provinces to enter into union. More emphatic was the stark conveyance that imperial protection was becoming contingent on provincial union. In an interview with the Prime Minister himself Smith was told by Palmerston that “the pivot on which the future Defences of Canada by England & themselves turned was Confederation.”⁴¹³ It was thus insinuated that unless the Maritime Provinces agreed to enter into the political union Britain would withhold military support. Speaking of New Brunswick it was stated that she might “reflect well on the great effect which her course may produce in regard to our responsibilities for her defence.” One of the further crucial factors enabling Britain to impress its wishes on the provinces was the evidence that pro-unionism crossed party lines, Smith meeting with the leader of the liberals and being told that the shadow minister fully backed union. Cardwell was told that Derby had spoken to Smith which “will put an end to any idea that the English opposition will assist him in resisting Confederation.”⁴¹⁴ The Colonial Secretary also wrote

Gladstone to Gordon, 11 July 1865

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Gordon to Cardwell, Cardwell papers, 5 October 1865

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 266.

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that "I am further directed to express to you the strong and deliberate opinion of Her Majesty's Government that it is an object much to be desired, that all the British North American Colonies should agree to unite in one Government."⁴¹⁵

Following Smith's visit therefore the imperial government determined that one means of converting sceptical maritime politicians to the union scheme was to bring them to England in order to impress upon them firsthand how determined Britain was for its implementation. This included Joseph Howe who had been heavily engaged with the provincial delegation to negotiate the terms of constructing the intercolonial railway but in the provincial legislature of Nova Scotia had stood against the policy of union. Cardwell therefore worked to summon Howe to London, ostensibly to discuss Reciprocity, whereby on arrival the true subject to be addressed would be union. The Colonial Secretary wrote to Russell that "if Mr. Howe could be sent for to come here, on business connected with the Reciprocity Treaty, he might easily be converted into a supporter of Confederation." American notice to terminate reciprocity was already beginning to sway thinkers in the Maritime Provinces that a better system of trade would now be required with Canada. The Foreign Minister therefore wrote to Howe on July 21 instructing him "to come to England at your earliest convenience, on business connected with the Reciprocity Treaty."⁴¹⁶ Howe had already been the target of pro-unionists in Canada and Britain in an effort to convince him to take up the cause of Confederation in Nova Scotia. One message from the Canadian legislature stated that: "I believe the only safety for the Whole is Union, the Intercolonial railroad & the erection of certain strong fortifications together with a thorough organization of the local forces & then with the assistance which I am sure England would under those circumstances willingly render I believe you might rest in peace & bid defiance to the

Cardwell to Monck, 15 July 1865, private and confidential.

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Morton, *The Critical Years*, p. 189.

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Cardwell to Russell, Russell papers, 15 July 1865; Russell to Howe, 21 July 1865.

Yankees.”⁴¹⁷ Equally the Government used the loan for the intercolonial railway as leverage to attempt to make the Maritime Provinces assent to the union scheme. Cardwell called the loan “the means of applying the requisite pressure, as the Guarantee depended upon her assent to the terms upon which the Government had undertaken to recommend it to Parliament.”⁴¹⁸ As both political union and the railroad formed part of British policy towards making the colonies more defensible, the Colonial Secretary wrote that “Canada cannot for ever – perhaps not for long – remain a British Colony. Upon this Railroad in my opinion depends in great measure her future destiny.” Watkin also argued that the railway was imperative to the provinces’ place in the empire and therefore that it was essential for the home government to support British North America on the railway scheme. Watkin questioned “Is this great work, the Canadian Pacific Railway, to be left as a monument, at once, of Canada’s loyalty and foresight, and of Canada’s betrayal: or is it to be made the new land-route to our Eastern and Australian Empire?”⁴¹⁹

The imperial government however determined that continuing to deny resources until confederation was agreed upon offered the best chance of success. Russell wrote that “I incline to the opinion, that in order to preserve our North American Provinces they must be united, and that some coercion will be necessary.”⁴²⁰ It was not just official government policy that produced this effect but the general vocal professions in Britain that the imperial tie should be cut off if the colonies refused to co-operate. All the while the scheme was progressing these voices were quietened down. The Canadian Governor General for example, having been on a visit to London and surveying the atmosphere, believed that

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Howe 5, Normamby to Howe, 17 February 1865, pp. 263-78.

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Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation*, p. 254.

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Edward Watkin, *Canada and the States: Recollections, 1851 to 1886*, (London, 1887), pp. IX-X.

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Russell to Cardwell, 4 September 1865.

little-Englanders were “for the moment, choked off by the proposal for our Union, but if that fails I believe they will return to the charge with redoubled energy.”⁴²¹

The effects of imperial tactics

That imperial policy met with some success in the Maritime Provinces can be seen in the transformation at the beginning of the 1866 session. The conveyance of British reluctance to continue military and financial support unless union be agreed upon - and that this was a unanimous feeling across both government and the opposition - had an evident effect in the Nova Scotia legislature. The pro-union leader Williams noted that “since the members have assembled here, very great change has taken place in their manner of viewing the question of confederation.”⁴²² Encouraged by this Monck urged Williams to proceed to attempt to pass the union scheme through the Nova Scotian legislature regardless of New Brunswick’s progress. The Governor General wrote “Could you not venture to go on without waiting for Gordon?”⁴²³ This Williams did. The provincial administrator cited both the cross-party consensus in London and the influential opinion of *The Times* stating that “I won many a man to our side by this proving that whichever side was “in”, the scheme would be persevered in” and was “glad to find the “Times” so zealous and talented in supporting the good cause.”⁴²⁴ Indeed, this political unanimity in Britain was evident when Russell’s ministry (Russell having succeeded as Prime Minister following Palmerston’s death) was replaced by a Conservative administration under Lord Derby. Lord

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Monck to Galt, 26 October 1865.

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Williams to Gordon, Stanmore papers, 12 March 1866.

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Ibid, p. 398.

⁴²⁴

Williams to Carnarvon 17 August 1866.

Carnarvon was welcomed into the Colonial Office as new Colonial Minister by Cardwell who made clear to him that the outgoing Prime Minister would continue to help ensure that the union scheme was passed through as quickly as possible. Cardwell told Carnarvon that:

“Lord Russell asked me today if I thought the new government would carry Confederation through this year. I told him ... I thought you could not reasonably be expected to do so. To this Lord Russell replied that perhaps you would wish to do so, as it is a very important measure, & it is impossible to say what accidents might occur if months were permitted to elapse: - & that with our assistance you would have no difficulty in carrying it.”⁴²⁵

This was relayed to the lieutenant governors in the provinces in order to further portray the unanimous British desire for union. Even on leaving office the former Colonial Minister continued to emphasise that the imperial prerogative of funding security should translate into making the recalcitrant Maritime colonies accept the confederation scheme. Cardwell wrote that “considering how John Bull pays the piper in the matter of defence for the Lower Provinces, there is something almost ridiculous in the idea of their standing upon an opinion of their own in such a matter against ours, and against that of Canada with five or six times their population.”⁴²⁶ Sir Frederick Rogers too told Carnarvon to impress on Howe “that Union was the proper thing for the interests of British North America, and for the interests of this country, and that it was a step which this Country had a right to expect from those who relied on her for defence.”⁴²⁷ In part due to the efforts of Gordon, in 1866 the New Brunswick legislature too came to agree on the union scheme. Anti-confederation was also defeated due to the impossibility of re-establishing strong trade ties with the United States. Reciprocity

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Cardwell to Carnarvon, Carnarvon 6/136, private, 6 July 1866

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Cardwell to Monck, 17 June 1866

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Rodgers to Carnarvon, Carnarvon FO 175-6, 12 Dec 1866

ended in 1866 and the Western Extension scheme was dead.⁴²⁸ Indeed, the backlash on the American side of the border from those who valued the reciprocal use they had been entitled too of the British North American fisheries had an impact in London too. Watkin made MPs aware of a passage in the report to the Revenue Commissioners of the United States for the year 1865-66 which stated “If the Maritime Provinces (of Britain) would join us ... with their hardy population, their harbours, fisheries, and seamen, they would greatly strengthen and improve our position, and aid us in our struggle for equality upon the ocean. If we would succeed upon the deep, we must either maintain our fisheries or ABSORB THE PROVINCES (sic).”⁴²⁹

The aftermath

Movements towards national unification were also giving rise to a new wave of militarism and imperialism in Europe, notably in Italy and among the German states. Therefore with changes to the balance of power taking place closer to home, it was even more critical for Britain to find an answer to Federal militancy in North America. Despite the imperial and colonial desire to match the American nationalism emerging from the Civil War with a national consciousness of their own, the irony remained however that the home government continued to try and avoid replicating the federal nature of the US system in their framework for Confederation. Indeed, despite its federative appearance the new structure contained key differences which reconciled the British government to the form union took. It was not like US federalism where the power contained in the constitution emanated from individual liberties and states rights. Here the model was the ‘second empire’ of the old colonial system whereby the new colonial parliament provided a strong central body and the local assemblies were ancillary to it. It also involved the first official use in the

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Creighton, p. 303.

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Watkin, *Canada and the States*, p.1.

colonies of the term 'parliament' for what would be the new central legislature. In terms of the nature of its authority, rather than the power surging upwards from the people and the states as in the US, it was passed downwards from the sovereign in the form of the British North America Act.⁴³⁰

The imperial government thus portrayed the union of the provinces as the establishment of a great continental state with its own sense of national identity and possessing territorial and economic power. In announcing the passage of the British North America Act Disraeli spoke of the colonial peoples' progress towards this aim: "There has already developed a formidable confederation, with the element of nationality strongly evinced in it. They have counted their population; they feel that they are numbered by millions; they are conscious that they have among the possessions of the Queen in North America a district of territory which in fertility and extent is equal to the unappropriated reserves of the United States."⁴³¹ Eulogising over the meaning of union and lauding the British North American people no doubt contained a degree of propaganda in an effort to repair the damage of several years of British frustration at the lack of co-operation in the provinces towards defence. It is also noteworthy that it emphasised the national and independent character of the scheme. The terminology behind Confederation too was intended to push the concepts of nationality and power. 'Kingdom of Canada' was rejected out of further fears of provoking the US with an overtly monarchical title and therefore 'Dominion of Canada' was conferred upon the new nation instead. Indeed, given the preponderance of American power Confederation represented a means with which Britain could speed up its disengagement from the continent. Intended to increase the provinces' ability to survive outside of the US, Confederation had been pushed by the imperial

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Creighton, pp. 306-7

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Disraeli, *Hansard*, CLXXXV, Vol. 177 (1867).

government to increase British North America's sense of national importance and therefore encourage the people to offer more assistance to its security.

With this now in place some continued to desire that imperial power might take its place again in North America. Watkin for example fondly hoped that with Britain standing by Canada, together they could forge national security for the new union writing that "a line of Military Posts, of strength and magnitude, beginning at Halifax on the Atlantic and ending at the Pacific, will give power to the Dominion, and, wherever the red-coat appears, confidence in the old brave country will be restored."⁴³² As Confederation was from Britain's point of view a means of delegating responsibility for security to the new dominion however, the ultimate aim was to reduce imperial troop presence. Thus in terms of Confederation's objective to offset Federal power, for British North America to become a viable counterweight to the US still represented a long-term strategy. Union in itself did little to improve provincial security, certainly in the immediate wake of the Civil War. Indeed, it is ironic that following Confederation much the same fears and pressures resumed themselves as had existed both before and during the conflict. Until the settlement of the Alabama Claims in 1870 insecurity remained that unless the Federal Government was satisfied in its compensation they would attack Canada for recompense. Indeed, throughout the negotiations on the terms of settlement Gladstone complained of the "submissiveness" that Britain was forced into due to the vulnerability of the Canadian border.⁴³³ Moreover instability in Europe renewed the fear that the US would pounce if Britain was drawn into conflict, especially as the Wars of German Unification took place through the decade. Clarendon wrote to Queen Victoria in May 1869 that "there is not the smallest doubt that if we were engaged in a Continental quarrel we should immediately find ourselves at war with the United States."⁴³⁴ This again

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Ibid, p. X.

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H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone: 1809 – 1874*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 186.

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merely renewed the drive to reduce the imperial military commitment to the provinces. Indeed, in 1870 as the Franco-Prussian war further destabilised the established continental order Gladstone anticipated getting “rid of all drafts upon the regular army for Colonial purposes, in ordinary circumstances, except in the four cases of Malta-Gibraltar-Halifax-Bermuda.”⁴³⁵

Unable to better address the strategic dilemma caused by the Civil War, Confederation was a step towards abdicating Britain's role on the continent. That it could in itself enhance British North American security was a fallacy, or even an exercise in self-delusion that existed at the time. In 1865 for example the *Saturday Review* printed that it was impossible that “an efficient defensive organisation will ever be brought about without political amalgamation.” For years the imperial government had faced the problem of how to make the provinces themselves assume the burden of defence. Unification was one means with which to do this. The Civil War had occurred at a time that Britain was looking to reduce its imperial military commitments, and the increased demands the conflict put on British North America's defence requirements only intensified this drive. Confederation was a policy intended to make the provinces more self-sufficient, and therefore remove some of the burden for defence from the imperial government in London to a new national government in Canada.

Summary

The fall-out from the Civil War had therefore made the imperial government determined for the British North American provinces to carry through Confederation. Indeed, colonial agreement on the union scheme had been portrayed by the home government as a prerequisite for continued imperial military support. When it became clear that the South would be defeated however, the resultant security crisis made achieving some sort of

⁴³⁵ Letters of Queen Victoria, Volume 1 p. 594, Clarendon to Victoria, 1 May 1869

H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone: 1809 – 1874*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 189.

measure towards imperial defence a necessity. The British cabinet faced an intense debate over erecting fortifications at Quebec which hinged on the dilemma of whether these would truly protect the provinces or actually provoke an attack on them, and also whether they would continue to render the colonial population complacent towards their own defensive duties. The Canadians however, like Britain realising that the victorious Northern armies might turn on the provinces at the war's conclusion, agreed to fund the fortifications slated for Montreal. The scares of Fenian influence in the North furthermore increased the sense of importance regarding the defences, as did the actual Fenian raids that took place into the provinces a few months later. The Quebec appropriations were therefore eventually voted in the imperial parliament, especially under the uncertainty brought on by the diplomatic issues with the US, though this was only undertaken on the tacit understanding that the provincial government proceed with the union scheme.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The imperial government had worked steadfastly to accomplish the Confederation of British North America since they had been presented with the Quebec Resolutions in 1864; though bringing forward the union project had been mooted throughout the Civil War. The British motivation for developing a unified political structure was the conception that with mutual institutions and leadership, not only would the provinces be better practically equipped to orchestrate defence; but with the shared sense of community and territorial standing they would also have an increased moral, emotional sense of duty to protect the new 'nation'. The metropolitan wish to accelerate this process was a short-term response to

the strategic security dilemmas posed by the growth of Federal military power during the Civil War, combined with the breakdown of Anglo-American relations arising from issues within it. This has been overlooked in the literature however between on the one side diplomatic and strategic studies which neglect the position of British North America: and on the other histories of Confederation which downplay the role of the mother country and the vital imperial context of British policy towards the Civil War.

When Britain's policy on unification is touched upon, it is generally regarded as a simple withdrawal in the face of the preponderance of American power on the continent.⁴³⁶ As this study has argued, this interpretation is flawed: the policies both of uniting the North American provinces and of reducing the imperial military commitment were products of the antebellum period and therefore both predated the Civil War and possessed more substantive influences alongside it. In both respects the intention was to impart greater responsibility on the provinces themselves with a view to preparing them for a strong independence separate from the United States. Establishment of a 'greater' nation was seen as a basis to simplify and delegate defence and to counteract annexationist sentiment towards the republic. Sir Edmund Walker Head for example, who was to be Governor General of the province when the Civil War broke out, argued that "Canada will never be annexed to the United States if we give her freedom enough ... & foster her own sense of self importance."⁴³⁷ This reference to the province's "sense of self-importance" moreover is revealing in itself in regard to how it played into the policy of unification. Prior to the Civil War it was even hoped this new nation state would over time grow to *challenge* and *offset* Federal hegemony in North America. It was therefore posited that union, self-governance and, ultimately, independence could redefine the continental balance of power. Far from beginning as a 'retreat' in fear of American power this scheme was considered possible

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Fuller, "British Assessments of Union Combined Operations", p. 126.

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Head to Lewis, 29 December 1853, HCC 1531: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Harpton Court Collection, C/1531.

because British military thinkers held little regard for the war-making capabilities of the United States. The fluctuating power-balance in the Civil War however together with the growing impression made by Union militarisation and diplomatic belligerence, led imperial statesmen to sanction Confederation far sooner than expected.

Diplomatic arguments

Diplomatic histories conversely have generally debated whether Britain tacitly or overtly sponsored Confederate independence as a means to arrest the growth of the United States, and have subsequently missed that, in fact, the imperial government already favoured the emergence of British North America in this role. This study has argued that the imperial government tacitly supported the South, but that this was largely founded on the simple pragmatism that British statesmen were convinced that no other possibility existed except separation, a belief also in part influenced by their initially derisory perceptions of US military capability. This however played a major part in poisoning British-American relations and helped initiate the great security fears which encouraged the premature resort to enacting Confederation.

This interpretation refutes that reached by Ephraim Douglass Adams that Britain did not favour the Confederacy and that the Civil War's bearing on the potential extension of the franchise and ultimately the Second Reform Bill was the crucial issue determining of British policy.⁴³⁸ As Brian Holden Reid has argued, even the pro-Northern MP Richard Cobden accepted secession was a Southern right and both Cobden and fellow radical John Bright believed the Union's efforts futile, at least at first.⁴³⁹ This study has shown that even despite

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Ephraim Douglas Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006), pp. 438-9.

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Brian Holden Reid, "Power, Sovereignty and the Great Republic: Anglo-American Diplomatic Relations in the Era of the Civil War", *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 14, Issue 2,

the tension and instability that pervaded British politics leading up to the Second Reform Act, there was a staggering degree of consensus amongst imperial statesmen in regards to supporting and enacting the Confederation of Canada. Whereas Adams professed the salience of the democratic reform issue for Britain's reaction to the Civil War, this thesis has suggested that English appraisals of the Federal system held far greater import for imperial policy in North America. British revulsion of the republican 'mobocratic' system influenced strongly the imperial wish to prevent the United States acquiring British North America - forming a central tenet of the policy of Confederation – while the warning the Civil War provided of the weakness of federal structures caused a dilemma over whether to resort to a federative version of unification over the apparently more sound legislative preference held in the metropolis.

This imperial aim to counter republican growth in North America through provincial unification, which evolved out of the fears of Federal annexation that existed at least from the time of the Canadian Rebellions, persisted right up to the Civil War. For this reason Adams and Kenneth Bourne were incorrect to conclude that Britain reconciled itself to a marginal role on the continent in the antebellum period. As this thesis has shown it was not until the Civil War that imperial strategists truly began to feel the military balance had swung decisively in favour of the United States and that this portended a disaster in British North America. Bourne reached this conclusion because his work placed too early a date on the imperial realisation that British North America had become a 'hostage' to Federal power.⁴⁴⁰ This study has argued however that prior to the Civil War Canada was not considered as weak or vulnerable as has been portrayed in the historiography, largely due to the low opinion of the US army and even lower verdict on its navy. The Canadian Governor General for instance in 1845 wrote "I presume that war may be carried on in North America on the same principles, and with the same results, as in Continental Europe. (Suppose) Napoleon

(June 2003), pp. 56-7.

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Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815 – 1908*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 171.

Bonaparte had possession of Canada with the resources of Great Britain and the command of the ocean. He would, it may be imagined, make short work of a war with the United States, if his object were as moderate as ours would be, namely an honourable peace. Why might not England do likewise.”⁴⁴¹

Strategic arguments

Bourne argued that the British North American Act was a final acknowledgment of Federal preponderance and a means of the empire ‘withdrawing’ from its role on the continent, an argument which this study has challenged as too simplistic. Strategic histories emphasise the role (or intended role) of the Royal Navy as Britain’s chief means of deterrence in protecting its empire in the period between the Napoleonic Wars and Anglo-American rapprochement. Those studies that refute that the Civil War was a watershed for British arms or power therefore argue that the Royal Navy carried on containing potential US aggression in the era.⁴⁴² This study on the other hand has argued that preoccupation with extinguishing the Southern war effort was the major factor determining Northern preference for peace with Britain as opposed to fear of the Royal Navy in of itself.

Certainly by the latter stages of the war the United States had ironclads and harbour defences which made imperial statesmen question their ability to bring their favoured strategy to bear of unleashing British warships against the US eastern seaboard. Furthermore, rather than the United States being held to ransom by the Royal Navy, during the Civil War British North America ended up becoming the ‘hostage’ historians have erroneously claimed that it was prior to it. This was because the prospect of US naval

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Metcalfe to Stanley, confidential, no. 55, 4 July 1845, W.O. 1/552.

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Andrew Lambert, *Royal Navy and the defence of empire*, in Greg Kennedy, ed., *Imperial Defence: The Old World Order, 1856 – 1956*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2008), pp. 115-6.

superiority on the Great Lakes revealed a critical anomaly in the impression of overriding British maritime strength. Imperial strategists, influenced by reports from their military experts, came to comprehend that American forces on the lakes - combined with their million-strong army now proven in battle - eventually would make an invasion of the provinces practically irresistible.

Both of these prongs of the attack would be serviced too by the far more extensive and sophisticated network of canals and railways in the northern United States than that which existed to defend British North America. It was summed up by Robert Lowe when discussing the unique threat the imperial government now faced as compared to the last time the nations had clashed fifty years previously. Lowe asked:

Are we going to embark on the defence of Canada as if the principles which we deemed sound in 1813 and 1814 were still to be relied on, and as if railroads had not been laid down over the whole of American territory? Take the Lakes. If America was more than a match for us in 1813 and 1814 on the Lakes, what must she be now, when by means of the New York Central and Erie Railroads she can transport both men and means to the scene; when she can carry down gunboats, as many as she pleases; when to one man of ours she can oppose ten, and if ten will not do, twenty?⁴⁴³

The US capacity to convert its greater merchant marine into armed vessels on the lakes concerned Britain, as did its ironclad programme. The new iron vessels provided a threat on the St Lawrence and to the defence of the empire's Atlantic naval stations. The Federal logistical advantage both in canal navigation and network of railways better enabled them to bring a force to bear, not only on the lakes, but also in putting an army across the Canadian frontier. This was especially problematic given relative US/British North American manpower. It was this host that drew Britain back from intervention, made clear as it was by

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Hansard, CLXXXV, (Vol. 177), col. 1098, Colonial Forts, 18 March 1865.

Seward that any interference would lead to military retaliation by the North, and this caused Britain to turn urgently to their long held plan for attempting to create a balance against United States hegemony through a confederation of the provinces. As Lyons wrote to Russell early on, "They would, no doubt, declare war immediately upon any European Power that recognised the Southern Confederacy. Such a war could have but one result, and would probably be very short; still it would be well to avoid it."⁴⁴⁴ The British Minister in Washington's statement that a British-American war could only have "one result" displayed military confidence in the imperial hierarchy, at least early on and at least at the top.

Indeed, belief in the superiority of British sea power remained the imperial trump card. Even post the intervention deliberations in the late summer and early autumn of 1862, threats to Anglo-American peace bought on by breaches or alleged breaches of neutrality - such as the actions of the CSS Alabama - inspired similar sentiments. This was characteristic defiance from Palmerston. The Prime Minister's dismissal of the Federal Navy however did not represent British military views of American maritime power by the war's end, particularly in regard to a defence on the Great Lakes. A Federal report on the state of security on the Great Lakes for example had been transmitted to the Colonial Office in 1864 and made unnerving reading in terms of emphasising the local advantages which all fell to the US. It stated that "there is already a considerable commercial marine upon the four great lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron and Michigan, which are open to the enterprise of our citizens. And this will increase with the augmenting population which is flowing in upon the regions washed by these internal seas. It is obvious that, from natural causes, the physical superiority will be found upon the southern shores of these lakes." It went on to state that "A victorious fleet upon these lakes could disembark an army at almost any point. If a harbour were closed by fortifications, they would only have to seek the nearest beach and land their men from boats, so that no defences we could construct would secure us against invasion."

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While Lambert might argue that no rival had the military capacity to coerce Britain, this study has argued that the imperial government had to temper its response to the *Trent* affair, as well as its policies on intervention and towards crises over neutrality, out of fear for the security of British North America. Brian Holden Reid too considered that Britain was able to maintain a policy of deterrence and was undaunted by the United States throughout these years, believing that US military potential had yet to be fully realised.⁴⁴⁵ It has been contended here that its mobilisation in the Civil War demonstrated that the United States could convert dormant peacetime manpower and industrial resources into a viable military force, and do so with such a relative speed as to cause great concern over the security of the empire. This study has also suggested that the transferral of “latent military power” to “actual” as Brian Holden Reid argued hampered the United States as a genuine strategic threat to Britain, might in fact be applied to the failure to convert the provinces into a state of readiness prepared to undertake the duty of defence themselves. In this respect the mounting sense of vulnerability about British North America was also attributable to a continued frustration on the part of metropolitan statesmen over the lack of action taken by the colonies themselves towards their own protection. It was to address this need for the provinces to assume greater responsibility for defence that the imperial government turned so unanimously towards Confederation. This was not because Britain wanted to escape its own share of fighting a war with the United States if this was necessary, but simply to relieve itself from the burden of local defence when its own war-winning strategy – viable by 1865 or otherwise – would be based on offensive action by the Royal Navy. Britain was thus looking to mitigate the demands that would be placed on imperial military resources if forced to go to war with the US. For this reason too the notion of Confederation as an ‘abandonment’ of the provinces is misleading and over-simplistic. This study has argued that British statesmen

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Brian Holden Reid, “Power, Sovereignty and the Great Republic: Anglo-American Diplomatic Relations in the Era of the Civil War”, in , pp. 53-4.

were determined to defend the provinces both on point of honour and due to their wish to secure it from republican expansion; however this prospect became so multiplied in difficulties as the Civil War and Federal strength developed that Confederation was appealed to as a means to cushion as much of the blow as possible.

Confederation arguments

In this respect historians of Confederation have oversimplified the imperial attitude to British North America, interpreting the metropolis to have been driven by a 'little-England' mentality and have subsequently misrepresented the British policy on unification.⁴⁴⁶ This study has challenged such conventional historiographical views of British anti-imperialism and argued that the reason for opposition to the proposed fortification scheme in 1865 – the money for which was nonetheless voted by parliament – stemmed not from the fact that MP's wanted rid of Canada, but a more complex array of factors relating to the imperial position in North America. One was the longstanding aspiration for the provinces to bear responsibility for their own local defences *as part of* the empire, a policy goal which, as stated, led to British support for Confederation. Also some parliamentarians wavered as the works appeared to be so modest as to make them entirely inadequate given the military force the United States had built up. The works moreover were unlikely to be ready for at least five years and therefore of little immediate value. The dissenters were also largely radicals such as John Bright, supporters of the Federal cause, and they were wary that entering into programmes of military construction might provoke the North into hostilities.

The tendency in the literature however to portray the mother country as anti-imperialist provides a mechanism with which to present unification as a triumph by provincial statesmen in overcoming resistance from both within and without to accomplish continental

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Robin Winks, *The Civil War Years: Canada and the United States*, 4th ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. 376.

union. Donald Creighton for example argued that the imperial government might have drawn back from the union scheme due to little-Englander opposition to further colonial politicking.⁴⁴⁷ This study has argued that anti-colonialism was not so vocal as Creighton suggested when it came to British North America. The dominant government figures in fact were steadfastly against 'abandoning' the provinces. As late as July 1864 when Gladstone advocated union of the provinces as a means to advance their self-sufficiency and to keep imperial troops at home, the Prime Minister had railed against the idea of abdicating the responsibility when he refused to "admit that it is a question for consideration and decision whether our North American Provinces are to be fought for or abandoned. There may be much to be said for the theory put forward by some, that our Colonies are an encumbrance and an expense, and that we should be better without them, but that is not the opinion of England, and it is not mine."⁴⁴⁸ That the provinces were a burden was "not the opinion of England" reflects on the fact that imperial prestige was something that the public invested in. Russell told Lyons as late as October 1864 that if the US attempted to annexe Canada, "they must look to a fight with us."⁴⁴⁹

What these studies also overlook, and what again goes back to Adams's claim about the divisiveness of British politics at this time, is the broad-based imperial consensus on achieving union. When specialist studies however do acknowledge widespread metropolitan support on union, they reach a different conclusion about the importance of the Civil War in accelerating British action. Ged Martin for instance denied that the problem of British North

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Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation, The Emergence of Canada: 1863 – 1867*, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1964), pp. 270-1.

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Minute by Palmerston, 29 July 1864, quoted in Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald* (Toronto, 1952), vol. I, p. 361.

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Russell 97, Russell to Lyons, copy, 20 October 1864.

American security was central to imperial endorsement of Confederation. Martin based this claim on the fact that the province of Canada would be the focal point of union and that that province's lack of contribution to defence convinced the mother country that they could not be trusted to orchestrate security.⁴⁵⁰ This study has demonstrated that because Britain supported union as a means to impart greater responsibility on the provinces towards defence, Martin's argument in fact should be inverted. It was precisely *because* of an imperial will under the spectre of Federal attack for Canada to display urgency towards self-defence that Britain advanced the need for confederation during the Civil War. This was particularly so after the defeat of the Canadian militia bill in 1862, following which even the Foreign Minister stepped in to advocate a federal union of the provinces. Martin still placed the chief explanation for union with the Canadian statesmen John A. Macdonald and George Brown, and argued that they merely appended the defence argument to their scheme in order to shame and/or scare opponents into accepting it. For Brown this was primarily to achieve a greater role for Upper Canada than that it held in the existing Canadian assembly; for Macdonald to preserve his role in the coalition government. Martin therefore considered the security issue secondary.⁴⁵¹

Martin asserted that, in fact, the logical imperial approach in the context of the Civil War would have been to have blocked the unification of British North America, as it was a course of action likely to enrage and provoke a US reaction.⁴⁵² As this thesis has shown, imperial endorsement of the Quebec Scheme was borne of an acute security dilemma that had built over three years of Civil War, extensive Federal militarisation and damaged Anglo-American relations. Martin overlooked the Committee on Colonial Defence's advancement of

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Ged Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837-67*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), p. 191.

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Ibid, p. 186.

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Ibid, p. 81.

union as early as March 1861 as a means to increase the provinces' responsibility for defence and the Duke of Newcastle's subsequent statement that union might indeed be "hastened .. by the condition of the rest of the continent", as well Russell's advocating of a similar scheme following the defeat of the militia bill in 1862, and even Gordon's plan for maritime union the following autumn – the plan which was resurrected by the Atlantic Provinces in 1864 and subsequently turned into the Charlottetown Conference on general British North American union. By the time the Quebec Scheme was presented imperial statesmen had already long anticipated a US attack to help reunite themselves with the South or in compensation for losing it, or in retaliation for Britain's stand over the *Trent* crisis, intervention or neutrality. It was not a case of the British government fearing provocation of the North by sponsoring union - that provocation was already perceived to have happened - ; rather Confederation was considered a means of mitigating the security problems posed by the dilemma.

Thus when threats to its neutrality in the middle section of the war again seriously endangered British North America the imperial government displayed willingness to revise the timetable of railway, followed by Maritime Union and then wider union, and instead advocate the larger confederation with immediate effect. Earlier preferences for a tight legislative system were now passed over in the process, and efforts were made to quash any displays of reluctance either from imperial representatives in the provinces or from colonial politicians themselves. Britain's adoption of Confederation as a policy to this end was evident from the efforts of the Colonial Office when the North really had the South hemmed in during 1864. Indeed, one of Cardwell's telling despatches to the provinces in June of that year stated that "the Colonies must recognise a right, and even acknowledge an obligation, incumbent on the Home Government to urge with earnestness and just authority the measures which they consider to be most expedient on the part of the Colonies with a view to their own defence."⁴⁵³ References to the imperial government's "right" and

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“obligation” to impress Confederation upon the provinces display the moral pressure attempted by Britain, the Colonial Minister writing that “all the British North American Colonies should agree to unite in one government.” Great pressure was placed on the lieutenant governors to impress the scheme on their provincial legislatures. Gladstone in particular used his influence on Gordon to make sure it was carried through in New Brunswick. It was also made clear to colonial politicians visiting England that Confederation was the earnest view of both the serving government and the British opposition.

These concerns were given a special foreboding by Federal militarisation and the fact that this was a time in which the imperial government was under pressure to reduce its colonial defence budget. British statesmen therefore turned to a policy of Confederation to attempt to make the provinces more ready and willing to help meet this threat. This was because unification was bound up with the idea that a vast union would enhance British North America's sense of identity, co-operation and willingness to protect the new nation. As Watken wrote “the cure ... was to provide, for all, a bigger country – a country large enough to breed large ideas.”⁴⁵⁴ Confederation was a political response to the problem, as militarily no quick-fix appeared to present itself. In this respect it was an acceleration of a long-held, long-term goal of attempting to challenge US hegemony and establishing a balance of power in North America. Greater government was a further step towards their self-sufficiency and the distant hope that they might rise to the strength to provide a counterweight to the power of the United States.

Indeed, the vague but nevertheless compelling rationales for Britain to largely break with common imperial policy and seek to unite its colonies: that they might find strength through union; build their own economic system and prosperity; and therefore be able to stop absorption into the US; were not so much altered in character by the Civil War, as they were magnified and given greater urgency. For example revulsion and suspicion of US

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mobocracy had long encouraged British statesmen to resist the spread of Federal republicanism over the provinces much less the rest of the Americas. Mistrust of the American 'mob' was ramped up during the Civil War, particularly following the *Trent* crisis after which many in the cabinet believed that Northern bitterness would carry the US into an attack on Canada. The British desire to stop the United States gaining control of British North America never changed; however the forces at the disposal of the Federal government, as well as the enmity towards the empire encouraging an attack did. Indeed, industrially and militarily, in armaments and weapons manufacture, and in the drive and ingenuity to produce a vast land army and powerful navy, the US had been markedly enhanced as a power by 1865. The growth of Federal power in the Civil War had given the imperial government an acute strategic problem, a problem which led to the immediate sponsoring of British North American union. The Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia the Earl of Mulgrave for example had stated in 1858 that "ultimately, the British North American Provinces will become one great, and, independent Country, but, I do not think that the time has arrived when they could stand alone"⁴⁵⁵ wrote in 1863 that "the state of things has however sadly changed over the last two or three years" as the US was now "a Military, a warlike & very aggressive power."⁴⁵⁶

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Mulgrave to Lytton, confidential, 30 December 1858, CO 217/221, fos 556-76.

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Normanby to Howe, 17 February 1865, Howe 5, , pp. 263-78.

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